

Interventions with/in Ethnography: Experiments, Collaborations, Epistemic Effects

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In memory of
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Doing Interventions: Experiments and Collaborations in Contemporary Ethnography

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Abstract

In this introduction to the 83rd issue of Kulturanthropologie Notizen we focus on the concept of intervention and highlight the impact of researchers' relatedness to their fields of study. While acknowledging that ethnographic studies have always had the capacity to be interventionist per se, we consider 'doing interventions' as a specific ethnographic methodological approach and, congruently, we reflect on experiments and collaborations and their epistemic effects. In this vein, interventions with/in ethnography hint at ethnographic knowledge that 'does' something in the field while the practice of intervening also alters ethnographic knowledge production. The authors who contributed to this issue of Kulturanthropologie Notizen provide a variety of examples to discuss how interventions with and in ethnography play out in practice and illustrate thereby how these modes are intertwined. Case studies range from ethnographic work in the global food sector to extractive industries; from field-work in and with social psychiatry to new forms of collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic; and last but not least, anthropology is discussed as a science in/of transformation. What unites all texts is the supposition that interventions with/in ethnography question what is established and taken for granted, transform normative and dominant perceptions of knowledge production, irritate discourse, and promote the re-imagination and re-conceptualization of the ethnographic practice at the same time.

Keywords: Intervention, method, ethnographic research, epistemic practices, knowledge production.

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Interventions, introduced

For more than a century, intervention was anathema in anthropology. From its inception, while often serving political interests, anthropological fieldwork was conceptualized as non-interventionist. Achieving a non-intrusive presence of the ethnographer in the field and in monographic texts was considered the hallmark of serious academic achievement. Yet in participant observation, to remain neutral and to refrain from getting involved proved to be difficult and often only possible at grave moral cost. "Anthropological practice is", as Beck (2009: 5) argued, "by its very nature involved." In the 1970s social movements and political critique were on the rise which have also left a mark on international cultural and social anthropology. New forms of anthropological activism emerged, and new objectives – beyond the advancement of scholarly knowledge – were formulated for research: Anthropological findings were to serve the needs of researched communities and research participants, anthropologists were called on to protect vulnerable populations, and their research was increasingly considered as a contribution to societal change. The ethical responsibilities of fieldworker were codified by professional associations, and the application of anthropological findings outside of academic settings – such as public health, the school system, urban planning or social integration of immigrants – became part of anthropological syllabi.

The 1980s saw another shift in how anthropology was re-conceptualized as cultural critique (Marcus & Fischer 1986), resulting in a redefinition of the significance of ethnography, both in terms of anthropology's signature research method and in terms of the discipline's textual genre. Several issues which have now become commonplace in the anthropological enterprise, such as the impetus of "being there" (Hannerz 2003; Hammoudi & Borneman 2009), of immersion in the field, of listening to interlocutors, and remaining aware of the impact of "writing culture" (Marcus & Cushman 1982; Abu Lughod 1991), were generated by radical critiques of earlier notions of anthropological knowledge production. Demands for critical distance from research subjects as well as attempts to objectify anthropological research were rejected. This resulted in intensified theoretical debates and inquiries into what constitutes anthropological knowledge, whether there is a specifically anthropological mode of knowledge production, and how the researcher's positionality shape anthropological findings. Among other developments, this also led to an emphasis on experimental approaches at the interface between Science and Technology Studies and ethnography. These endeavors are based on the fundamental assumption that ethnographic methods do not simply represent worlds, but that methods are always inventive and thus world-making (Lury & Wakeford 2012). That this assertion plays a crucial role in anthropological debates as well as in Science and Technology Studies is highlighted by the evolving interest in methodological reflections and ethnographic experiments.

Intervention, then, became one of the terms used in these debates to draw attention to the epistemic and ethical challenges which are inherent to ethnographic research.[1] Etymologically the term 'intervention' characterizes an interposing, something that comes in between, derived from the Latin verb *intervenire*. As such, it marks a moment of interruption. Sometimes this interruption implies a deliberate act carried out with the intention to stop a flow and to create irritations. At other times intervention is caused by conflicts, crises or impositions from outside which provoke temporary breakdowns and generate re-orderings of taken-for-granted routines and practices. Overall, the term intervention cannot be elaborated

[1] For a discussion of related terms – coordination, collaboration and curation – see Faust & Hauer 2021.

uniformly as Paula Hildebrandt (2012) argues[2], and the term has been used in manifold – and sometimes inflationary (Gantner et al. 2015: 34) – ways (Binder & Hess 2013; Faust & Hauer 2021).

In anthropological research, intervention purportedly often refers to anthropology's potential to generate critiques of social developments as well as the relevance of ethnographic research to foster change and societal transformation. For many years, as we elaborate below, intervention was charged with the connotation of political and ethical involvement beyond academia, refering to different forms of engaged research. Other, more recent uses of the term have focused on interventions as "situated" methodological experiments (Wildner 2015; Zuiderent-Jerak 2015) and as part of new forms of collaborations in fieldwork (Estalella & Criado 2018; Boyer & Marcus 2020). These more recent approaches have pointed out the epistemic effects of intervention in particular – both *within* the research fields we investigate as well as *on* ethnographic research practices themselves. Intervention thus touches upon several central aspects of anthropological research: To whom are researchers committed and who is addressed with the publication of their findings? What are the goals of anthropological research and how are research findings authorized and legitimated? And how does intervention challenge taken-for-granted research practices and methodological assumptions? With this 83rd volume of *Kulturanthropologie Notizen* we wish to take up these questions, foregrounding intervention with and in ethnography as an epistemic stance *and* research practice. We discuss interventions with/in ethnography and their potential epistemic impact on both our research fields and the collaborations we engage in as well as on our ethnographic knowledge production and how this allows us to experiment with interventions during fieldwork.

Our conviction is that intervention responds to new and fundamental challenges for the discipline, its knowledge production and its methodologies. We thereby connect current debates in anthropology to the idea of anthropology as a critical force in societal crisis as proposed initially by Ina-Maria Greverus (1990), the founder and chair of the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main and initiator of the publication series *Kulturanthropologie Notizen*. Greverus understood intervention as an integral part of doing anthropology and argued for "a contemporary and practice-oriented cultural anthropology that makes its contribution to a humanization of our world in an interdisciplinary network" (Greverus 1982: 217, translated by authors).

Adopting this understanding of ethnography as an interventionist practice, we ask: How does ethnographic research intervene in the fields we investigate? And how does intervention alter anthropological research practices? Our focus on experiments with intervention, new forms of collaborations, and the emerging epistemic effects thereof, does not imply a distinction between the epistemic on the one hand and the ethical or political on the other. Rather, it offers accounts that draw particular attention to actual practices of 'doing intervention'.

[2] As Friedrich von Borries et al. (2012: preface) pinpoint in their 'Glossary of Interventions', the term is 'overused and at the same time underdefined'. Based on a research project on 'Urban Interventions', the authors list over 100 different definitions of intervention, referring to its broad use for activism, art in urban spheres, and as artistic methods (Laister et al. 2014).

Getting Involved: From Public and Engaged Anthropology Towards Experimental Collaborations

In search of addressing problems which extend beyond the discipline and in attempts of fostering societal and/or political change, two recent ways of framing anthropology and its knowledge-production as forms of intervention have emerged: Public Anthropology on the one hand and Engaged Anthropology on the other. While the former can be understood as an attempt to address audiences outside of the confines of academic disciplines which themselves rely on communication outside of scholarly publishing (Beck 2009; De Lauri 2018; Borofsky & De Lauri 2019), the latter resumes earlier attempts at activist, change-oriented anthropological involvement (for instance, Farmer 1999 or Scheper-Hughes 2005).

Public Anthropology is, at its core, about "messaging" (Besteman 2013: 4). The indented audiences are generally non-anthropologists, and research results are often directed at either the general public or specific political decision-making fora. Its goal is to make anthropological findings better known and more accessible to a broader public. These efforts are sometimes contested. Criticisms frequently center around the claim that public anthropologists' writings are too journalistic and tend to simplify complex issues (Hale 2008), yet Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2009) argues the opposite and suggests that anthropologists should cooperate with journalists to make their findings more accessible. Dilger and Falge (2019) also argue that the supposition that Public Anthropology lacks intellectual persuasiveness is unjustified. Instead, they propose transcending the dichotomy between theory-generating ethnography on the one hand and applied anthropology on the other, suggesting a "continuum of theory-informed practice" (Dilger & Falge 2019: 481, with reference to Rylko-Bauer & Singer 2006, own translation) in which the tension between reducing or intensifying complexity must constantly be renegotiated. In addition, these authors emphasize that anthropology – and other disciplines – are by no means value-free, neutral or objective; rather, as Hahn and Inhorn (2008: 9) also argue, some anthropologists "regard the application of anthropology to the solution of real-world problems as tainting the discipline with politics and values (as if their own studies were apolitical and value free)".

If anthropology, however, aims at having an impact on public perceptions and in political fora, monographs and journal articles are usually not particularly suffice as a means of communication and other forms of communication, such as blogs, films or podcasts, are currently being experimented with among public anthropologists. Yet it is not entirely clear to what extent these forms of 'messaging' actually lead to real transformations (Dilger & Falge 2019). Despite this ambiguity, Shaw and Agro (2017) argue stridently to seek dialogue with the public and to reach audiences on a global scale. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2005), a renowned advocate of Public Anthropology, considers this to be the responsibility of anthropologists and attests that while anthropologists are perfectly capable of analyzing current cultures and societies, they should urgently involve themselves more in socio-political debates. According to Eriksen, anthropology is not only engaged but it must also be more engaging.

A further approach to actively employ one's anthropological expertise in terms of intervention consists of calls for an Engaged Anthropology, which focuses on the impact of ethnographic knowledge for the communities studied during fieldwork. Following the 'engaged turn' ethnographic projects are constructed according to their relevance for the world, wherein ethnographers are critically engaged actors with/in the research field, thereby illus-

trating their research challenges to a wider public. In this sense, Engaged Anthropology incorporates parts of what has been described above under the term Public Anthropology. Catherine Besteman (2013: 3) notes that Engaged Anthropology is also collaborative, critical, reflexive, and practical; at its core, it is about societal transformation, and thus frequently "values-driven". While this often implies that the anthropologist adopts the research community's problematizations and offers assistance in overcoming exclusion and marginalization, this can also mean that the researcher imposes her normativity and understandings of how the world should (not) be. At the same time, if the researcher conducts engaged research with one particular group, it may mean no longer having access to another. Thus, an Engaged Anthropology not only transforms but also confronts, which is especially true when anthropology and activism merge (Binder et al. 2013). And while cooperation with activists has been recognized in anthropology (and in related disciplines) as a legitimate mode of research, assessments are altogether different when ethnographers suddenly find themselves in research relationships with people who are opposed to activist agendas and ideas.

Public and Engaged Anthropology both intervene by introducing ethnographic findings into contexts where they had no agency before – i.e. the researched communities, political fora, or the general public. Following this framing, intervention is usually considered as a strategic insertion of anthropological knowledge to interrupt taken-for-granted worldviews, power relations, and judgements of norms and values in fields of investigation, based on a specific political or ethical stance. This active and intentional intervention has the potential to shape new tropes and narratives and to alter epistemic categories (Eitel & Meurer 2021). More recent interventionist approaches, however, emphasize the tactical and improvisational character of research engagements and discuss the actual epistemic practices and methods of anthropological knowledge-production. In such approaches, ethnographic knowledge-production is often enhanced by the simultaneous (co-)presence of researchers sharing their analytical and interpretative insights *during* fieldwork. Such a collaborative approach (Lassiter 2005; Boyer & Marcus 2020) fundamentally changes established roles, partnerships and procedures in ethnographic research, thereby offering "the potential for new, intermediate forms of knowledge-making" (Boyer & Marcus 2020: 2).

That intervention can effectively be used as a method during fieldwork to involve audiences outside of academia is reflected by anthropologists Tomás Sánchez Criado and Adolfo Estallela (2018: 2). They argue in favor of cooperating with social actors in the field to reflect jointly on ethnographic findings and to translate them for audiences outside of anthropology. Their concept of experimental collaboration implies "joint anthropological problematizations" that transform informants into "epistemic partners" (ibid.: 10) who thereby enter a companionship to share "the endeavor of problematizing the world" (ibid.: 20). As Criado and Estallela and the contributors to their edited volume also highlight, experimental collaborations are usually not intentionally designed or set-up by researchers in a strategic way prior to fieldwork. Rather, they evolve during fieldwork in response to forms of engagement or expectations of the actors involved. Often, they are catalyzed by "fieldwork devices", such as when jointly organizing an event, developing a platform, or co-editing a publication. Criado and Estallela emphasize that such interventions trigger a dual learning process and generate new epistemic practices, both among members of the researched community and for anthropologists. While anthropologists are of course reliant on learning from their interlocutors (which is crucial for any form of ethnographic research), to enter into experimental collaboration with other actors in the field often constitutes an interruption of one's planned

fieldwork. When one understands these joint anthropological problematizations as interventionist endeavors, it becomes clear that interventions are neither merely carried out by ethnographers nor only 'side effects' of ethnographic research. Intervention, then, becomes methodologically productive in that it creates moments of irritations to unveil seemingly opaque, hidden or muted dimensions of and in the field. These become visible through collaborative modes of producing knowledge, potentially enabling a distribution of reflexivity among those participating in "co-laborative ethnographic research" (Bieler et al. 2021).

The effects of such interventionist practice on anthropological knowledge-production and what they imply for anthropologists' epistemic work are issues the discipline is currently grappling with and which serve as a source of motivation to publish this volume. If intervention constitutes an innovative method in anthropology, we can pose – much like Zuiderent-Jerak (2016) did for Science and Technology Studies – the following questions: If intervention is a method, what do we and our research partners learn? How does intervention make a difference? What are its intended and unintended effects? And what are the conditions under which learning process triggered by interventions are enabled?

Interventions with/in Ethnography: Experiments and Collaborations in Practice

In this volume, we examine two distinct modes of intervention: *Intervention with ethnography,* on the one hand, draws attention to the potential impact of ethnographic knowledge in (but also beyond) our fields of research, often resulting from an intentionally staged act of intervention by the anthropologist. *Intervention in ethnography*, on the other hand, unveils the productive – and often unintended – interruption of our own epistemic practices, resulting in experimentation, reflection and ultimately in ways of rethinking ethnographic practices. These two specific modes, however, are intertwined and they cannot be clearly distinguished. As such, we reflect on *interventions with/in ethnography* whereby we focus on an integration of these different ways of doing intervention.

While we agree that intervention is inevitably part of ethnographic research – whether by taking sides (as with Engaged or Action Anthropology), working with our research partners (as with Collaborative Anthropology), or by sensitizing/mobilizing the public (as with Public Anthropology) – we are particularly interested in "doing intervention" as a methodological question to explore the potential epistemic impact of intervention both within our research fields and on our research practice. Such "reflexive examination" (Criado & Estallela 2018: 1) of one's own research practices is congruent with the emerging literature in anthropology and the social sciences which emphasizes the critical examination of knowledge production and highlights the epistemic practices of one's own discipline. This is demonstrated, for example, in approaches which scrutinize the practical act of doing comparisons in the social sciences (Deville et al. 2016), which examine the potentials and limits of a co-laborative distribution of reflexivity (Bieler et al. 2021), or by discussing the analytic practice and devices through "experimenting with ethnography" (Ballestero & Winthereik 2021). In a similar way, this issue invites readers to look behind the scenes of ethnographic research and discover 'the backstage' where lesser known or hidden aspects of ethnographic intervention come to the fore. Far from providing easy to follow recipes or 'how-to' guidelines, the authors in this volume depict and reflect on their own research practices and provide a variety of examples of intervention in practice. While some research projects presented here were

intentionally designed as a form of intervention, others turned 'interventionist' in rather happenstance ways, thereby leading to surprising encounters, generating frictions and unintended consequences. The articles in this volume all share that they do not conceptualize intervention either as a clear-cut format, a specific research strategy which follows clear political or ethical intentions, nor as an outcome which critiques particular societal problems. While this might have been part of some of the projects, the authors highlight the manifold challenges and unforeseen developments they faced while carrying out ethnographic work, reflect on the unintended detours and unexpected engagements they encountered, and highlight their practices of 'doing intervention'.

Intervening with Ethnography…

The first set of three chapters of this volume offer insights into the generative use of ethnography – both as a research practice and as analytical output – within the fields studied by the authors. All three chapters discuss examples of interventions that move beyond the typical – or at least more expected – forms of engagement with research partners. When thinking about ethnographic interventions, cooperation and collaboration with minorities, activists or marginalized actors frequently come to mind. And, indeed, the question of with whom one engages, whom to give a voice, with whom (not) to collaborate, and where the boundaries of epistemic partnerships are situated are inherent to ethnographic studies. Yet ethnographers also encounter actors in more powerful positions, and questions arising therefrom surround the (im-)possibility of collaborating with these actors. The following chapters illustrate what experimental ethnography can look like when researchers collaborate with more powerful actors – either in an intended or unintended manner.

Ruzana Liburkina questions anthropology's striking absence in fields that are usually framed as hegemonic configurations of capitalism, namely among companies and entrepreneurs in the private sector. In "Ethnographic Encounters in Extraordinary Times. A Plea for Experimental Interventions in More-than-Business Relations", she draws on her extensive ethnographic research on global supply-chains in the food sector, looking at the practices that constitute their "connectedness" and proposing to view them as forms of knowledge production rather than as economic activities. Such a shift in the conceptualization of the field as more-than-business networks allows for situated experimental interventions with powerful economic stakeholders as well as the generation of critique from within the field. Reflecting on what is needed to intervene in such settings, she suggests refraining from conventional framings of collaboration and intervention as dyadic, but rather to attend to the manifold – sometimes conflicting – relations between knowledge practices, market operations, and value arguments.

In her contribution "Fuzzy Embeddedness: The Ethnography of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Extractive Industries", **Susana Carmona** also reflects on ethnographic research in the private sector and provides insights into her research in Cerrejón, a mining area in Colombia. With her research focus on the enactment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) she adds to a growing body of literature on methodological questions surrounding ethnography in corporations by focusing on an underdiscussed issue: the reflection of how the anthropologist immersed in corporate logics thereby becomes part of the hierarchies and power relations that corporations enact in extractive territories. The author illustrates that collaborations must by no means always be intentional; on the contrary, they are often fuzzy. While these unintended and fuzzy collaborations reproduce ethically questionable practices

and forms of legitimization in natural resource extraction, Carmona concludes that they nevertheless aid the analysis of how CSR works.

While in Carmona's case unintended forms of collaborating emerged and posed a challenge for the ethnographer, creating forms of intended collaboration with actors in the field is also far from simple. It is often, as **Patrick Bieler** reflects, a rather messy process**.** He entered his field of research partly as an academic co-laborator and partly as a co-worker for a mental health care service provider. In "Situated Withnessing in/as Intervention: Co-Laborative, Ethnographic Long-Term Research with Social Psychiatry", Bieler demonstrates the generative force of becoming embedded within the mental health care infrastructure of a German metropolis. He understands intervention as a method to disrupt routine situations, making previously invisible issues and dynamics visible, and purposefully provoking moments that can be of usage for ethnographic knowledge production on purpose. In his contribution, Bieler grasps these moments as "moments of interferences"which can unveil the constitution, construction and coming into being of new realities. At the same time, and this emphasizes the overlap of both intervening with and intervening in ethnography, Bieler discusses the effects of this form of engagement on his own process of analysis and theorizing.

… and Intervening in Ethnography

In addition to interventions *with* ethnography, we can also identify modes of interventions *in* ethnography which can bring about inadvertent interruptions of our epistemic practices which result in experimenting with and reflecting on ethnographic practice. We found this aspect to be underdiscussed in the examined literature, even if it has received greater attention in debates on experimental collaboration and co-laboration (Boyer & Marcus 2020; Bieler et al. 2021; Faust & Hauer 2021). These contributions demonstrate, for example, how situated interventions (Zuiderent-Jerak 2015) can generate irritations both within ethnographic knowledge-production and within the – often taken-for-granted – methods of ethnographic fieldwork.

In their article "Wenn eine Pandemie interveniert. Überlegungen zur ethnographischen Praxis seit COVID-19", **Laura K. Otto** and **Nicole Philipp-Jahnke** discuss the global Covid pandemic as an intervention in ethnography. This intervention of a public health crisis in the epistemic and methodological practice of ethnographic field research demonstrates that familiar questions of field access, (im)possibilities of collaborating, and research ethics, take on new urgency. Against the backdrop of qualitative interviews with ethnographers and blog posts, the authors illustrate how ethnographers experiment with the ethnographic toolkit in a situation in which physically co-present research becomes nearly impossible. The authors thereby highlight a field of tension ethnography currently experiences: While the intervention by the pandemic allows for experimentation with digital methods through which new and unexpected collaborations with actors in the field emerge, other research participants can no longer be reached and their perspectives and practices are more likely to be overlooked. Yet the authors conclude that these current and far-reaching disruptions demonstrate the strength of ethnography, namely its ability to be reconfigured in the wake of enduring social change.

That the pandemic not only has significant consequences for collaboration with research partners, but also for collaboration among scientists, is demonstrated by **Andreas Streinzer, Anna Wanka, Almut Poppinga, Carolin Zieringer and Georg Marx.** During the pandemic, the authors experimented with unconventional forms of collaborating as an interdisciplinary

team of researchers with the goal to study how household provisioning was reconfigured in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland during the pandemic. In their contribution "Near Co-Laborations. The VERSUS Project as Relational Epistemic Practice to Analyse the Covid-19 Pandemic", the team of researchers discusses different forms of working together, thereby reflecting on challenges of what it means to collaborate among disciplines. On the one hand, referring to shared epistemic orientations for creating knowledge in specific fields, they discuss their joint project as co-laboration. On the other hand, they consider collaboration as the everyday practice of working together during the unfolding pandemic. The authors acknowledge that collaborating and experimenting with methods in a team is a complex undertaking inherent to many research projects. The VERSUS team thus argues that these frictions and challenges should not be repressed and taken out of sight, but rather that they should be engaged, reflected upon, and talked about as a matter of care in epistemic relations.

In "Kulturanthropologie als Veränderungswissenschaft", **Manfred Faßler** paints a complex picture of worldwide transformations through large-scale digital infrastructures, the rise of data economies, the automation of decision-making processes, and the resulting impact on forms of sociality and governance. He reviews discourses that either condemn or celebrate such transformations, noting that neither are conducive to understanding the complex co-evolution of humans and machines. Responding to what he considers a gap in anthropological theorizing, he calls for a new anthropology (and sociology) which is able to develop new concepts and a new vocabulary in order to analyze and describe the fundamental impact of the above-mentioned developments on forms of knowledge, sociality, and culture. To address such a transformation, he emphatically calls on us to become 'scientists in/of transformation'. While his contribution is not directly connected to the issues of intervention with/in *ethnography*, Manfred Faßler nevertheless reminds us of the potential anthropology has to intervene epistemologically in global processes of transformation as well as to reconsider our own theoretical conventions and foundational concepts such as *Anthropos* and *Logos*. He passed away suddenly and unexpectedly on 27 April 2021 before this volume was completed. In publishing this – his final – article as part of this collection, we wish to honor a lifetime of inspiring academic work. We dedicate this volume to Manfred Faßler's memory.

All contributions in this volume demonstrate that anthropology is always transformative and changing: Be it the set of methods, be it practices of actors in the field, but also the ideas and actions of actors beyond the field. Yet a few caveats are necessary: Researchers do not and cannot know how and where the ethnographic knowledge they have produced is employed, and which consequences the ethnographers' footprint has in its aftermath. Ethnographic findings can thus take on a life of their own beyond the anthropologist's control (Brettel 1993), thereby advancing in undirected and unintended manners (Binder & Hess 2013). Nevertheless, the power of anthropological interventions certainly lies in de-naturalizing the-taken-for-granted and "rupturing the status quo", which can, eventually, "offer alternative ways of thinking" (Besteman 2013: 5) – both in 'our' fields and in our own epistemic and methodological practices. While the strength of interventions with/in ethnography certainly lies in its potential to widen horizons, to make seen what is initially unseen, and to challenge and change fixed categories, it remains an often messy, uncontrollable and spontaneous endeavor. It is, however, within this very messiness that interventions can be made fruitful. As an outcome, interventions with/in ethnography have the potential to change prevailing perceptions of knowledge production, and they can foster the re-imagination and re-

conceptualization of the ethnographic practice. Therein, it can enable 'new ways of doing' anthropology.

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Extraordinary Ethnographic Encounters in Extraordinary Times. A Plea for Experimental Interventions in More-than-Business Relations

Ruzana Liburkina

Abstract

This contribution reconsiders ethnographic encounters with mainstream market actors in light of the ever-intensifying ecological crisis caused by prevalent patterns of economic activities. Effective experimental interventions in hegemonic configurations of capitalism are hitherto hard to realize due to fundamental incompatibilities between the logic of academic ethnographic work and that of conventional business operations. Viewing the private sector as comprised of interconnections of economic activities and knowledge production diminishes the epistemic pitfalls of such encounters. Based on empirical insights into the food sector, this paper suggests discarding the view of collaborations with economic actors as dyadic. Instead, it makes a case for approaching more-than-business networks that inextricably link knowledge and business practices. Such experimental interventions may tackle three constitutive pillars of contemporary capitalism: relations between localized knowledge practices and overarching discursive forms; relations between formalized expertise and market operations; and relations among conflicting truth claims and value arguments.

Keywords: experimental interventions, private sector, food systems, ethnographic collaboration, Anthropocene

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Introduction

Ethnographers[1] render the failure of contemporary capitalism to sustain life tangible in particularly insightful ways. They depict the conditions for the prevalent patterns of economic activities and their devastating effects to emerge and be stabilized. This epistemic capacity is grounded in decades of theorizing and analyzing the market order of the economy as a historically and politically situated form. Thus, questioning and challenging the naturalization and reification of capitalism is one of the core overarching objectives of many ethnographic inquiries into economic activities (e.g., Tsing 2015; Appel 2019a; Livingston 2019).

[1] Here the term ‘ethnographer’ refers to scholars who “map contemporary situations (not cultures)” (Westbrook 2008: 44) by interrelating conversations and encounters (both immediate and synthetic) with interlocutors and social theory.

Against this background, the questions posed by the editors of this volume seem unrelated to ethnographic research on actors and practices at the core of the market economy. Reflections on the role of ethnographic knowledge for the politics and ethics in the fields we investigate have gained momentum in various discussions on forms and formats of cooperating with our interlocutors. However, propositions for experimental and collaborative formats of ethnographic knowledge production decidedly neglect the core of the private sector, for mingling with commercial interests has proven to entail the risk of being submitted to and reproductive of its logics (cf. Suchman 2013). In what follows, I make a proposal that takes these concerns seriously and still goes against the grain of the assumptions that usually arise from them. To be precise, the line of reasoning in this paper contravenes the widely held conjecture that ethnographic knowledge may be generated *about* and not *with* market actors. It is grounded in the conviction that ethnography's potential "to challenge and change existing order, provoking new orderings or subjectivity, society and culture" (Fortun 2012: 450), can and should be mobilized to intervene in and with the private sector. Such experimental engagements are only feasible if the hitherto prevalent "ethics of suspicion" in encountering business is complemented by some aspects of an "ethics of promising" (Fortun 2005). While the former is based on "oppositional critique" (ibid.: 161), the latter strives to initiate interactions that generate constructive outcomes despite differences (ibid.: 170).

Proposing such a shift may seem illusionary as long as firms and entrepreneurs are perceived as a somewhat distinct, free-floating kind of actor. However, it may well be possible to craft promising (as 'open-ended and constructive') ethnographic encounters by reconsidering this view. I argue that we should acknowledge, scrutinize and harness the inextricable relationships that link market actors with various experts and practices of knowledge production. Entanglements of business and knowledge constitute a promising point of access for envisaging and designing interventions in the hegemonic arrangements we seek to disrupt. I make this claim based on my ethnographic insights into the food sector – a field of economic activity that is among the most watched and approached by public, academic and political concerns over the urgent need for sustainable change. Thus, the nexus of mainstream agriculture, food manufacturing and logistics is pivotal for the manifold issues associated with the Anthropocene. By drawing on the cases of the conventional rice sector in Uruguay and an alternative food network in Germany, this article discusses the crucial role of business-knowledge entanglements for the enactment of the ethics and subjectivities that undergird or undermine established patterns of economic activities in contemporary food systems. It is precisely this quality of the interconnections of economic and knowledge practices that makes them so critical for ethnographic interventions. Since these interconnections are shaped by epistemic and political concerns, as well as commercial concerns, they are accessible for such interventions despite our well-founded skepticism of collaborating with the private sector.

This contribution drafts a possible agenda for experimental encounters that could vex what is taken for granted as 'business as usual.' I propose designing such encounters around the goal of tinkering with the understanding and arrangement of three kinds of relationships: those between business activities and knowledge production, between localized knowledge practices and broader knowledge regimes, and among divergent truth claims and value arguments. Intervening in these dimensions reconciles the desire for a radical change with the immediate need for reforms.

Collaborations and Experimental Ethnographic Encounters: Knowledge with Whom?

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of decidedly collaborative encounters between ethnographers and their interlocutors: those that explicitly and actively intervene in political practice, and those that primarily unfold around the objective of generating knowledge. Guided by the fundamental question "knowledge for whom?" (Hale 2007: 105), activist ethnographers seek to change existing configurations of social injustice, discrimination, repression and oppression. They aim at "participating in the struggle[s]" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 414) of those who suffer, instead of merely depicting them. Overcoming distance and acting upon one's complicity is also the goal of epistemic collaborations (Holmes & Marcus 2008). Yet, in this body of work, ethnographic interlocutors are first and foremost considered counterparts in knowledge production. This premise is consequential in as much as it brings particular kinds of actors to the foreground: "public institutions, activist collectives, artistic spaces and laboratories" (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018: 1). Doing ethnography in such contexts does not primarily require and afford advocacy but egalitarian engagement and "creative interventions" (ibid.: 2). However, same as in the case of activist ethnography, intervening in the field in such a manner also necessitates at least a basic compatibility of political objectives, ethical principles and value arguments. As most ethnographers are trained in critical social sciences, it is not surprising that we mainly seek to work with interlocutors, whose agendas, reflexivities and visions are assembled around resistance, counter-politics and creativity (see, e.g., Estalella & Criado 2018; Groth & Ritter 2019). In the rare cases when ethnographers actually collaborate with hegemonic institutions, they intervene in practices that at least already aim at compensating for the flaws of the established order (cf. Bieler et al. 2021; Bieler in this volume).

The proposal made in this paper joins the ranks of a few existing attempts of speculating about and reflecting upon occasions to collaborate with actors whose doings are deeply imbricated in hegemonic agendas (cf. Westbrook 2008; Deeb & Marcus 2011; Gilbert 2015). It does so by examining the possibility of engaging with the least common and most counter-intuitive kind of a counterpart: business. While Holmes and Marcus (2008: 83) casually list a pharmaceutical firm among examples of potential epistemic partners for experimental ethnographic encounters, such obviousness is not reflected by the actual state of the art in research. This becomes particularly evident when it comes to fields and practices predominantly associated with the Anthropocene and the ongoing ecological crisis. Ways of approaching the primary sector are rather dichotomous. Along with NGOs, art collectives and activists, counter-hegemonic market actors and initiatives may well be considered potential political and intellectual partners (cf. Sarmiento 2017). In ethnographic-anthropological inquiries into the core of capitalism and so-called harm industries, on the other hand, scholars tend to even avoid entering an 'old-school' kind of collaboration that positions field practitioners as their informants. In fact, most studies on such fields "do not involve ethnographic placement within the corporation" (Benson & Kirsch 2010: 464) but rather concentrate on a "textual analysis of corporations, including critical readings of advertisements and marketing campaigns" (ibid.).[2]

[2] Marina Welker's (2014) and Hannah Appel's (2019a) work are the most prominent exceptions that provide stunning analytical insights.

There are many reasons for ethnographers to abstain from viewing mainstream market actors as epistemic partners of any sort. Comprehensive access to a field of activity that is secretive by nature is obviously difficult, and often either denied or limited in fear of negative publicity and market competitors. After all, ethnographic fieldwork is nothing like individual expert interviews or meticulously prepared transparency initiatives – its course and outcomes cannot be fully predicted or controlled by executives and hence arouses their suspicion. Moreover, profit-oriented organizations tend to pose a demand for immediately tangible practical or even commercial benefits of intellectual encounters (Liburkina 2021). Hence, epistemic collaborations with business enterprises are hitherto mainly relinquished to the domain of corporate ethnography. However, such an embedded form of research poses a high risk of epistemic differences harmonizing. Divergent concerns and stances are likely to be smoothed out before becoming relevant for ethnographic analysis (Suchman 2013).

Harmonization is calamitous for any ethnographic endeavor that aims to address the ecological crisis at those very field sites that essentially contribute to the acceleration of its intensity and speed. After all, such encounters are not meant to enact advocacy or a priori shared objectives. Instead, it is the kind of 'creative interventions' that are supposed to seek to "engineer […] a subject with a will to know, differently" (Fortun 2012: 459). As such, they are crucial for realizing the overarching goal of upsetting the established mode of ordering human-environment relations. Ultimately, inducing change does not only imply empowering those who already promote it. It also requires the possibility of addressing those, whose practices and strategies suspend, defy or prevent it.

Against this background, the fundamental guiding question for ethnographic collaboration – "knowledge *for whom*?" – should be accompanied by another more controversial and tricky one. It is hardly disputable that ethnographic encounters initiated to address the chasms of the Anthropocene should benefit ecologies of life in general, not specific profit-oriented actors. What is far less straightforward is *with whom* we should engage in order to generate knowledge that can help achieve that ambitious goal. Most ethnographers working on 'anthropocenic' matters collaboratively focus on market actors and fields that are situated beyond or in opposition to hegemonic agendas. As a notable exception, Paul Gilbert (2015) made and then resentfully reflected upon a rare and discomforting attempt to collaborate with representatives of the mining market elite. Meanwhile, I argue that experimental ethnographic projects also need to design encounters beyond the dichotomy of the "virtuously subversive" (Marcus 2000: 8, cited in Gilbert 2015) and those who "operate within centres and seek knowledge about other places" (Everts 2016: 60). In view of the tenacity of the "Capitalocene" (Moore 2016), it seems particularly worthwhile to engage with types of economic actors whose doings should be considered neither heroic and revolutionary nor scandalous and outrageous.

'Business as usual' may at first come across either as a boring or as a dangerous place to look for intellectual partners. Rather than crafting ideas and truth claims, it mainly reproduces those that are already in place. Addressing it might seem to only fit the purposes of those of us on whose imaginations capitalist hegemony has put its claim (Appel 2019b: 32) – those who dare not envision and demand radical transformations. Moreover, critical interventions might be re-appropriated for further immunizing today's plastic "soft capitalism" against critique (cf. Thrift 1997; Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). The approach to 'business as usual' that is put up for discussion on the following pages acknowledges and addresses these concerns. To make a case, I will shed a slightly unusual light on the much-discussed intersection of economic activity and knowledge practices. I shall claim that we need to give it

more analytical credit by consistently viewing firms and companies in the food industry as elements of *more-than-business* networks rather than as distinct entities. What follows from this claim for experimental ethnographic encounters is the possibility to craft interventions that may overcome the aforementioned limitations of collaborations with individual business organizations. As they are envisaged to include sites of knowledge production, such encounters would not be exclusively defined by market logics, poor imaginative capacities and the risk of harmonization. Instead, ethnographers would find themselves productively irritating truth claims right where they unfold their full world-making potential – in the flow of everyday practice. Hence, such interventions would not merely aim at irritating practitioners in individual firms, but interfere in the locus of enacting market realities more generally. As such, they would be situated and potentially far-reaching at the same time.

Acknowledging Business as More-than-Business

I first came to think of the interconnections of knowledge and business practices as bearing potential for collaborative ethnographic work during my fieldwork amid two strikingly different agri-food production and trade networks. In 2017, I conducted 13 weeks of participant observation in an eco-localist alternative food network (AFN) in Germany, which is certified organic by the EU and an NGO; its members are committed to strict fair-trade regulations and various environmental standards. The second agri-food network was the national export- and growth-oriented Uruguayan rice sector, where I conducted 21 semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations for four weeks in 2017 and two weeks in 2018. Nearly all of the long-grain rice produced on irrigated fields in Uruguay is sold to the country's five largest rice milling enterprises, which process the grains and export them – mostly via international brokers or traders – to more than 60 countries worldwide. The German AFN rejects the logic of the prevalent food regime, whereas the Uruguayan rice sector clearly reproduces it.

Navigating through the two contrasting but similarly prosaic, non-scandalous networks made me acknowledge and scrutinize the crucial role of intertwinements between for-profit activities and knowledge practices. Despite being strikingly different, both sites of food production and trade were shaped by and organized around such business-knowledge entanglements. Food sector practitioners in both the German AFN and the Uruguayan rice sector met professional economists and agricultural scientists on a daily basis. Their encounters were comprised of flows of data, information and nutritional materials; joint events and conferences; shared office space; personal friendships and systematic political support; daily calls and meetings; joint publications and project proposals. Moreover, those relationships were characterized by a fundamental kind of mutual dependence: The experts gathering around the agri-food networks needed the latter as the obligatory subject of their knowledge work. Vice versa, farmers and food industry practitioners needed to be involved in processes of knowledge transfer to organize and assess their operations. Thus, knowledges on agri-food production and trade on the one hand, and agri-food networks as actual enactments of such knowledges on the other, exist for each other "in the strong sense of the coconstruction of identity" (Stengers 2010: 38). Business in the food sector never stands alone. It is given form as such in networks of *more-than-business* relations that inextricably interconnect profit-oriented activities and knowledge production.

Not least because of this continuity of assessing, informing, evaluating, advising and implementing, the interconnections of economic activity and knowledge practices are an essential passage point for reflexivity on the part of food sector practitioners. It was in and through those interconnections that farmers' and managers' activities in both networks were contextualized and mirrored against the background of value arguments, political rationales, sociotechnical imaginations and representations of food systems. In the context of Uruguayan rice production, maximizing efficiency and consistently prioritizing crop yield over all other concerns was known as a form of caring for and about the national economy. The quality parameters of rice varieties and the flows of money from the rice sector to other parts of the local economy were continuously assessed and valuated in terms of their impact on the country's economic well-being. An economist working for an agricultural research institute summarized some of the results of such analytical work:

> "For each ton of equivalent paddy rice […], from these 79, almost 80 dollars per ton that is profit, about a little bit less than 60 goes to the society. Only 21 are kept by the sector. This shows the very importance of the chain in terms of supporting the rest of the economy." (Interview, 10.10.2017)

For the actors involved in producing, selling and studying rice in Uruguay, being continuously presented with such findings resulted in a particular way of making sense of the sector's role and impact. Rice sector practitioners came to reflect upon what they did as responsible in ethical and political terms. They were recognized and recognized themselves as subjects of responsibility and their economic activities as indispensable for the distributive capacity of the national economy. In various interviews and informal conversations, they would often draw on my interviewees' and other experts' work and elaborate on how the cattle industry, shipping sector, subsidy scheme for public transportation and road infrastructure all depended on their work. From a critical outsider's perspective, such a moral economy can clearly be acknowledged as grounded in the power of the modernist notion of the national economy (cf. Murphy 2017) and as an instantiation of the neoliberal program of development promotion. It is still important to note, however, that subject positions and reflexivities in the food sector were given form in and through the imbrication of business and knowledge practices.

This was also the case in the German AFN, even though the resulting subject positions and reflexivities themselves were radically different. There, striving for efficiency was explicitly meant to be backgrounded in favor of embodied engagements with the well-being of intimate others: trade partners, farm workers, farm animals, soil ecologies and bees. In relations to knowledge practices, these highly situated and bounded instances of caring for particular co-existents could be acknowledged and assessed as an overarching responsibility for resisting the hegemonic food regime and its dreadful dynamics. In emphasizing their responsibility for promoting radical change, AFN practitioners often referred to alternative economic models and to a "regional economic cycle" they were supporting. The latter was a conceptual model linking sustainability to rural development that was mobilized in publications of various organizations that collaborated with the AFN, as well as in the literature revolving around the notion of "post-growth" (e.g., in Paech 2008).

On the whole, my empirical material suggests that business and knowledge practices in the food sector are inseparably intertwined. Moreover, it implies that their interconnections are the locus of reflexivities: rather than in the commercial enterprises or in the mind-sets of

their executives, reflexive capacities assume form in an ongoing series of physical and synthetic encounters between business and knowledge practitioners. In and through such encounters with agronomic and economic expertise, food sector practitioners make sense of their activities against the background of particular politics and ethics. Both of these insights have already been acknowledged and put to work for experimental ethnographic collaborations with alternative economic actors (cf. Snyder & St. Martin 2015). What I suggest here is that we could also harness them for designing interventions in hegemonic contexts.

Intervening in and with Hegemonic Knowledge-Economy Interconnections: An Agenda

As I argued above, experimental interventions in hegemonic sites of the market economy are crucial for coping with the situation of the Anthropocene – a situation that connects multiple incommensurable worlds and presents itself as an existential dead-end generated by capitalism (Zigon 2018). I also elaborated on the reasons why such endeavors are unlikely to be aspired, initiated and realized on the part of ethnographers situated in academia. Then, I took a detour to introduce a view of economic activities in the food sector as comprised of interconnections of business and knowledge practices.

In assuming that sites of knowledge production and business are inevitably entangled, we no longer need to think of collaborations with market actors as unfolding in dyadic relationships between researchers and firms. Rather, they can and should include actors who inform, assess and contextualize the activities of those firms. Such a triadic constellation widens the scope of potential ethnographic interventions. Instead of addressing individual sites of mundane profit-making, they would tinker with relations that constitute the backbone of today's market economy. Engaging with them in experimental ethnographic formats would go far beyond reformist interventions in just another corporate strategy. As the rest of the article argues, it may be an attempt to irritate the very truth claims and value arguments that widely sustain the status of the current order of the economy as the only one imaginable.

Moreover, a triadic collaboration actually seems more feasible than a dyadic one in addressing the private sector. Cooperating with market actors is hitherto mainly the business of corporate ethnographers, whereas academically situated researchers do not have the means to mitigate the severe epistemic threats posed by the rationale of usefulness and harmonization. Meanwhile, there is an impressive track record when it comes to ethnographic encounters between social scientists and knowledge practitioners of all kinds. The body of ethnographic work conducted in Science and Technology Studies (STS) provides concepts and methodological tools required for collaborating with experts and applied researchers as epistemic counterparts. The specific difficulty in designing encounters that are meant to irritate the dynamics that undergird and sustain the disaster of the Anthropocene lies in the need to strike the proper balance between openness and critique. How can we engage with knowledge practices that legitimize and enact the patterns of activities we consider harmful, without either losing sight of the bigger picture or merely translating the process into a preconfigured scheme of judgements?

Drawing on his work in the field of genomics, Mike Fortun (2005: 170) pleads ethnographers to commit to an "ethics of promising" (as opposed to an "ethics of suspicion"):

> "An ethics of promising for us means being reluctant to judge too quickly, preferring instead to construct new assemblages in which experimental practitioners […] can 'muddle through' together toward mutual understanding and even practical ends."

The concerns raised by the epistemic power of agronomy and orthodox economics are certainly different from those associated with the field of life sciences. Nevertheless, Fortun's emphasis on the need "to construct new assemblages" rather than deconstruct the old makes his idea of an "ethics of promising" interesting for reconsidering encounters with the food sector as well. Moreover, his notion of "muddling through" qualifies as a credo for addressing the challenges entailed by this type of collaboration. Critical ethnographers of the Anthropocene on the one hand, and managers, chemical farmers, industrial engineers, agricultural advisors and applied economists on the other, are unlikely to ever agree on all aspects of defining sustainability and envisioning change. If the goal is to tinker with reflexivities so that they might give rise to a will to know the present situation and future trajectories of food systems differently, such unlikely encounters *must* embrace friction as their precondition and permanent feature. After all, acknowledging and coming to terms with disagreement and incompatibility is crucial for "the ideological recognition of epistemic contingency" (Boyer 2015: 99).

But what is it that should come to light as contingent in the course of collaborative encounters between ethnographers and more-than-business networks? Drawing on my own study as well as on Christopher Henke's (2008) insights into the work of farm advisors in industrialized agriculture, I see three dimensions that need addressing when it comes to efforts invested in questioning and experimentally reconfiguring the rigid patterns of the prevalent food regime:

First, experimental encounters designed to foster the "will to know differently" should explicitly foreground and denaturalize *the embeddedness of localized knowledge practices in agronomy and economics in overarching knowledge regimes*. Critical analysis of hegemonic knowledge tends to view applied research, local advisors and practices of implementing national research strategies as instances of broader discursive forms. We might put this view to work for purposes of irritation, and allow our epistemic counterparts to challenge it. Carefully broaching the issue of assuming their work is meant to introduce and bring to life a rationale that they can hardly ever adjust, might prompt knowledge practitioners to come up with counterexamples. Moreover, it might initiate reflections on how the existing "ecologies of power" (ibid.) are calibrated in their fields of knowledge production, and how they could be re-calibrated. For instance, the Uruguayan economist from an agricultural research institute quoted in the previous section had much to share on his professional experiences with several different local stakeholders and political institutions, and on the tensions involved in such interactions. In addition, he talked about participating in an international group dedicated to developing national agricultural transformation pathways, and ways of interrelating abstract research objectives and local political agendas (Interview, 10.10.2017). Such reflections reveal the inconsistencies, conflicts and ambivalences that are inherent in allegedly predictable "ecologies of power." They can help us further "understand the ways that local interactions are connected with institutional structures" (Henke 2008: 6). Engaging with them and learning from them is indispensable for resisting the perilous analytical temptation to view and represent the current order of the economy as inevitable. Once tangible and problematized, the relation between centers and peripheries of epistemic power could

be contested in experimental formats. Applied economists, e.g., my interlocutor from Uruguay, might be enrolled in participatory processes of developing research formats and tools that do not aim to harmonize diverse expectations but explicitly address conflicting concerns.

Apart from that, collaborations with more-than-business networks should seek to further explore and use *the potentialities of the relation between knowledge and business practices.* Consultants and applied researchers sustain enterprises in the food sector by evaluating what they do and providing access to the specific information and technologies needed to optimize it. Henke (2008) uses the notion of repair to depict the maintenance dimension of this work. He also suggests that the highly localized expertise that is mobilized in its course does not induce transformative change (ibid.: 179). By the same token, Henke's and my insights also make clear that the interface between knowledge and business practices is all but trivial and unidimensional. Therefore, admitting its lack of revolutionary potential should not prevent us from thinking about the spectrum of its potentialities beyond mere perpetuation. Ethnographers who engage with a more-than-business network over a long time are well positioned to develop collaborative "fieldwork devices" (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018) that may invoke and trigger dynamics other than those of maintenance. Those devices could be new formats of joint activities, knowledge exchange or even argument and objection. A field study conducted by Uruguayan agronomists and economists in close collaboration with rice farmers is a good example of a possible entry point for such formats. The researchers themselves mainly used the project to collect detailed information on the variety of agricultural practices and their yield-related effects (Field notes, 10.11.2017; 03.02.2018). However, such occasions of intense exchange could thinkably be harnessed for epistemic work dedicated to joint reflections on political and economic challenges, conflicts and visions. Such experimental encounters, in turn, may figure as disruptive reminders of the fact that knowledge practices can interfere with business practices in non-linear and unpredictable ways, and vice versa.

Finally, experimental ethnographic work with the private sector could establish partial and temporary instances of peace amid the *multiplicity of inevitably conflicting truth claims and value arguments*. Ethnographers may act as diplomats and bring together more-than-business networks that enact irreconcilable ways of knowing the economy. Isabelle Stengers (2005) introduces the notion of diplomacy to elude the idea of negotiation and convergence. The Belgian philosopher of science emphasizes that practitioners' attachments and obligations "are not free to forget or reformulate at will" (ibid.: 193). Diplomatic practice acknowledges that and aims at "slowing down of all the good reasons everybody has to wage a justified war" (ibid.). My insights into two different worlds of agri-food production suggest that business and knowledge practitioners alike are well aware of practices and imaginations that contradict and contest their own. Rice sector practitioners in Uruguay knew that their activities were contested by critics of agricultural intensification and the hegemonic food regime, while AFN practitioners knew that the noble aims of their initiative would be considered illusionary from the food industry's perspective. Here, the main task of diplomatic work is not to identify overlaps or promote compatibility – that would be truly futile. Rather, diplomacy implies detaching inevitable attachments from the need to discredit others. Setting up a joint consortium on specific questions, a field-based experiment or a research proposal are all formats that could possibly facilitate that. Such projects would force efficiency- and market-oriented food industry practitioners to take seriously and become more familiar with the

kinds of concerns and knowledges that avoid and compensate for the externalities and failures of the predominant food regime. Ethnographers with a track record in studying knowledge production are best qualified to do the actual diplomatic work that is required for turning "a contradiction (either/or) […] into a contrast (and, and)" (ibid.).

Tackling these three dimensions would be a profoundly critical intervention. It is grounded in disconcertment and disagreement with the premises and dynamics that sustain conventional food systems. At the same time, it would force ethnographers to go beyond the "politics of judging" that are "both productive of and dependent on an aesthetic of oppositional sobriety" (Fortun 2005: 160). Rather than pointing at failures from an outsider's vantage point, they would delve right into the mess of divergent, at times discomforting attachments. Figuring out what new assemblages could be constructed despite those old, inevitable attachments, is an important intermediate step for Anthropocene ethnographers who hope for radical change. While hoping and envisaging, we do not necessarily need to wait and keep safe critical distance from the present situation. Rather, we can choose to promote change at sites that do not deserve sympathy and yet need to be addressed.

Conclusion

Most recently, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has uncovered the flaws of contemporary food systems acutely and ubiquitously. The zoonosis itself, the omnipresent scandalous disease outbreaks in the meat industry and wasted harvests are indicative of the highly degrading mode of ordering human-environment relations that marks the Anthropocene. The current crisis has emphasized the need for radical change more than ever. However, while we urge for a revolution, things continue going terribly wrong. More precisely, they go wrong amid the quotidian hegemonic relations that mostly escape the reach of our epistemic interventions.

Based on this general insight, I plea for broadening the scope of such experimental ethnographic work to include 'business as usual.' The pitfalls that usually accompany such encounters often prevent us from pursuing them. Taking these constraints seriously, I propose reconsidering the understanding of collaborations with business actors and organizations as dyadic. At least in the food sector, market activities are inseparably connected to knowledge production practices. Re-imagining business actors and organizations as elements of more-than-business networks rather than as distinct entities allows ethnographers to approach the former through 'the back door.' Thus, we no longer need to exclusively communicate with the CEOs but may also set up triadic encounters with epistemic partners whose work realities are way more familiar to our analytical lens: knowledge practitioners.

Considering experts and research institutions as entry points for experimental work with the private sector opens up a new range of possibilities for such interventions. In this paper, I briefly outline three dimensions to be tackled: relations between localized knowledge practices and overarching discursive forms, relations between knowledge and business practices, and relations among conflicting truth claims and value arguments. Addressing these dimensions allows us to combine the urge to contest hegemonic forms that keep capitalism in place with a commitment toward "muddling through" their thicket to curate reflexivities.

Such a commitment does not free us from the need to reference the good old question of "knowledge for whom." The conceptual model of a soft, plastic capitalism that lives and flourishes off knowledge practices has proven to be accurate and valid. Any kind of knowledge fed into arrangements that make up today's market economy is always at risk of

being parasitically re-appropriated. Nevertheless, the ongoing, ever-intensifying ecological crisis prompts us to take the risk and introduce new means of intervention into commonplace arrangements of the market economy – means that go beyond "oppositional sobriety." Thus, I propose a less prominent question for collaborative ethnographic work: knowledge *with* whom?

The Anthropocene forces us to reimagine the canon of our epistemic practices and consider unpleasant encounters. This paper suggests how to instigate such collaborative endeavors without compromising a critical stance. It may not make any promises on the success of such an undertaking, but it is grounded on the promise inherent in recent reflections on experimental modes of ethnographic research (cf. Holmes & Marcus 2008; Westbrook 2008; Fortun 2012; Niewöhner 2016; Estalella & Sánchez Criado 2018; Bogusz 2018; Bieler et al. 2021). This body of work gives reason to assume that we might be well prepared for finding the right "fieldwork devices" to actively alter some of the certainties and stabilities that we are trained to observe and analytically dismantle.

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Fuzzy Embeddedness: The Ethnography of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Extractive Industries

Susana Carmona

Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the extractive industries is a relatively new but growing topic for anthropology. To study CSR, anthropologists often conduct ethnography *in* corporations, which provides a unique perspective to discern the functioning of corporate power, company–community relations, and the mainstream discourses of global governance. However, ethnography in corporations requires further reflexivity about the anthropologist's positionality and what it can tell us about the functioning of CSR. I build on my experience conducting an ethnography of the *Cerrejón mine* in Colombia, one of the biggest in the world, and a dialogue with other anthropologists' methodological and theoretical reflections about CSR. I elaborate on the conceptualization of ethnographers' work in corporations as *fuzzy embeddedness*, to explore the temporary, ambiguous, and often unacknowledged ways in which the ethnographer is immersed in corporate logics, and becomes part of the hierarchies and power relations that corporations enact in the extractive territories. The article develops two main arguments. First, mining corporations see ethnographers as stakeholders in their *performance of transparency,* therefore turning the relation into an enactment of CSR. Second, empathizing with corporate officials is a productive avenue to understand the functioning and reproduction of CSR. Through the text, I present some methodological considerations and hints about the overall functioning of CSR.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), extractive industries, indigenous groups, ethnography of corporations, Cerrejón

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Introduction

During a hot, windy morning in La Guajira desert, located in northern Colombia, I briefly met Misael Juriyú, an indigenous leader looking for the help of a mining corporation. At the time, I was conducting an ethnography of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs of the Cerrejón mine, one of the largest and most controversial open-pit coal mines in the world. The morning I met Misael, I was present at the "Experimental Farm", a small compound in the middle of the indigenous territory from which the mining company manages aid and social projects for some of the more than 300 Wayuu communities in its area of

influence. Misael, who spoke very little Spanish, handed me an envelope containing names and ID numbers of the people in the community he represented. He explained: "food is not arriving in my community."

At first, I did not know what to do, but I quickly realized that for Misael, I represented the company he had come to look for, seeking help. I was, like most corporate employees, an *Alijuna* (or non-indigenous). I also shared other characteristics such as age, language, origin within the country, and ethnicity with corporate employees. I felt awkward. I wanted to correct the mistake, so that neighboring Wayuu communities did not see me as part of the corporation, but that did not make much of a difference for Misael, who patiently waited for my help. This was not the first and not the last time that I was taken for a corporate employee. On this occasion, I went and called the Experimental Farm administrator, who could do no more than take the envelope and send Misael back home with no promises. The administrator later explained to me that communities for the next round of food deliveries had already been selected. He would now perhaps set in motion a bureaucratic procedure with Misael's request. If they were lucky, the community would receive groceries from the following round of nutrition programs, coping at least temporarily with the enduring threat of hunger that most Wayuu families face.

I will not elaborate here on the effects of 40 years of open-pit coal mining in this peripheral Colombian region. Suffice it to say that poverty, anthropogenic environmental change, and the negative impacts of open-pit mining disproportionately affect the Wayuu communities, who find themselves dependent on government programs, international aid, and CSR projects. Despite decades of receiving coal royalties and numerous programs aimed at overcoming poverty, La Guajira is one of the two most impoverished regions in Colombia. The power hierarchies, violence, inequality, and discrimination that the indigenous communities have faced since colonial times are still in place and are often reinforced by the mine's presence.

In this article, I will explore the awkwardness I felt as an ethnographer when being identified as part of the corporation that I had come to observe. This feeling was productive as it led me to reflect on ethnographic work among corporate officials in a region where long-term power structures place them in a position of privilege and paternalism towards local inhabitants. Based on this experience, I conceptualize, theoretically and methodologically, the ethnography of CSR in extractive industries, a topic increasingly encountered by anthropologists interested in contexts of resource extraction (Dolan & Rajak 2016; Jacka 2018). I hope that my experiences might guide other ethnographers who plan to work in similar settings and contribute to this emerging field with new concepts that describe the ethnographic practice.

CSR is a broad field of discourse and practice within contemporary capitalism and sustainable development governance. In the extractive industries, CSR is a powerful discourse that frames and aims to legitimize corporations' relations with local communities in extraction sites. These contexts frequently involve tensions and conflicts that sometimes turn violent, which CSR attempts to manage and prevent (Becerril 2021).

While ethnographies around resource extraction have often focused on the experience of local communities, ethnographic attention to corporations is increasingly popular. Ethnographic research *in* corporations offers unique insights into the strategies, representations, and practices of economic and political elites. Furthermore, it reveals the nuances and limitations of corporate employees' agency and helps to problematize the idea that the corporation is a monolithic structure with no internal contradictions (Welker 2014). However, fur-

ther methodological reflection about the ethnographer's involvement with mining corporations is necessary. In contexts of resource extraction, ethnographers need to question how their work might involve unintended collaborations with the expansion of the extractivist logic of contemporary capitalism, so repeatedly linked with the global ecological crisis and human rights violation.

While most ethnographers offer some reflexivity about their work and share ideas about conducting fieldwork among institutional actors, conceptualizations of anthropologists' involvements with corporations are still limited. In fact, the academic/activist community tends to frown upon ethnographers of the corporation, expressing concerns about their cooptation by corporate discourses, the risks of over-empathizing with the research subjects, or not pressing enough for social and environmental justice (Kirsch 2014). The absence of concepts that enable us to discuss the potentialities and problematic aspects of ethnographies *in* and *of* mining corporations adds to the difficulty of discussing these concerns and limits ethnography's potential as a method to study elites and powerful institutions.

I contribute to filling this gap in the literature by elaborating on the ethnographer's relations with corporate subjects in the context of extractive industries. I expand on the idea that ethnographers find themselves in a *fuzzy embeddedness* with the corporation, a term first mentioned by Catherine Coumans (2011) to refer to anthropologists receiving logistical support from corporations. The concept was later discussed by Marina Welker (2014) who argued that not only the ethnographer, but also local communities are embedded with extractive projects in numerous ways. I define this fuzzy embeddedness – evidenced in my own case by my feelings of awkwardness – as the temporary, ambiguous, and often unacknowledged ways in which the ethnographer is immersed in corporate logics and becomes part of the hierarchies and power relations that corporations enact in the extraction territories.

Through an ethnographic description of my own work, I develop two main sub-arguments or dimensions of the anthropologist's fuzzy embeddedness with corporations. First, mining corporations see ethnographers as stakeholders in their *performance of transparency,* therefore turning the relation into an enactment of CSR. Second, empathizing with corporate officials can be a productive avenue to reveal an affective dimension of the working and reproduction of CSR. To present these discussions, I engage in a dialogue with the reflections of other authors in the field; through the text, I put forward some theoretical and methodological considerations, and briefly illustrate the functioning of CSR in La Guajira, Colombia.

In this article, I begin by exploring the ethnographic literature of CSR and anthropologists' engagements with corporations. The section does not attempt to be a thorough literature review of the CSR field but a review of some works and concepts that provide valuable methodological insights concerning the ethnography of CSR. I then introduce the Cerrejón mine, the region of La Guajira, and the functioning and evolution of CSR in the region. In the following sections, I elaborate on the concept of fuzzy embeddedness while I present my ethnographic work in the company and reflect on what I learned about CSR from this experience. I finish with some conclusions.

Methodological Reflections in the CSR Literature

The discourse and practice of CSR is a broad field resulting from liberal democratic concerns about the role of corporations in society. It became well institutionalized in the 1990s after several scandals about corporations violating human rights, and in the context of increasing

global environmental consciousness as well as neoliberal reforms pushing foreign investment in the global south and a retreat of the welfare state (Blowfield & Frynas 2005; Dolan & Rajak 2016).

Dinah Rajak (2011) presents a pioneering ethnography of CSR in the extractive industries, in which she provides some methodological hints on how to approach CSR. She studied the multinational company Anglo American and its operations in the subsidiary Anglo Platinum Ltd in the Platinum Belt in South Africa. She defines CSR as a *movement* ubiquitous and curiously hard to pin down, necessarily involving a multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and multi-scalar ethnography. Rajak (2011) also notes, as I myself experienced as well, that the ethnography of CSR frequently requires relying on the analysis of documents, media articles, and corporate reports. Furthermore, interviews are often time-limited and involving actors in different organizations, for example, senior corporate officers, corporate personnel, consultants, NGO partners, government representatives, and many more CSR insiders. Rajak also conducted participant observations of trans-local events such as CSR conferences and meetings. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate methodological reflections and ethical aspects of her work.

Considering CSR as a multi-scale phenomenon – in the sense of it being enacted and given meaning in interconnected but different geographical scales – enables us to account for the dialectic relation between the global and the local. In other words, CSR configures mining regions and shapes neoliberal subjectivities in the sites of extraction, and these localities at the same time articulate demands and constrain corporations' behavior in ways that co-produce the international standards and corporate codes of conduct. This is in line with the argument of anthropologist Stuart Kirsch (2014), that CSR is the dialectical result of the relationship between corporations and their *critics*, a category that includes actors in all stages of the commodity chain.[1] In this sense, CSR seems to articulate discursively the result of contentious interactions with the potential of providing society with space to discuss corporate responsibilities, and key ethical aspects of the capitalist economic system, and even to prosecute corporations' misbehaviors in international tribunals when these do not comply with their self-imposed standards.

Nevertheless, when placing attention on the interactions between corporations and communities in the mines' areas of influence, anthropologists have shown the manipulative and operational character of practices framed as CSR. In these contexts, CSR has been shown to operate as a government technology (Carmona & Puerta Silva 2020), and has been criticized for greenwashing damaging environmental effects (Conley & Williams 2008), spreading unfulfilled developmental promises (Frynas 2005), contributing to the expansion of corporate power and neoliberal capitalism (Rajak 2010), serving to co-opt critics, and fostering resignation among affected local communities (Benson & Kirsch 2010a, 2010b).

In his ethnography of the campaign against the Ok Tedi mine in Indonesia, Kirsch (2014) elaborated on these criticisms of CSR showing how corporations manipulate science amid

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[1] To give an example, I once met a citizens' group in Germany living in a city whose main coal provider was the Cerrejón mine. They invited me to present my PhD research. I learned that they had long been in contact with Colombian activists and were well informed of the social and environmental issues concerning the Cerrejón mine. They lobbied enough to make the municipality switch coal providers. These activists' networks play a crucial role in monitoring corporation–society interactions and the shaping of the CSR field. Corporations increasingly face the need to extend their public relations to groups previously unacknowledged or non-existent. These activists' networks are a promising avenue for ethnographic work inquiring into corporation–society relations more broadly.

environmental controversies. This leads him to reject ethnographers' involvement with corporations and call on the discipline to take a clear political stance on the side of local communities, social and environmental justice. For Kirsch, conducting ethnography in the corporation entails the risk of co-optation "because the tendency of ethnographers to empathize with the subjects of their research may influence their findings or temper their critical perspectives" (Kirsch 2014: 12). Although Kirsch recognizes that refusal to conduct ethnographic research inside the corporation leads to potential blind spots, his position exemplifies a widespread distrust among academics and activists. I experienced this stereotype and often had to explain that my interest in CSR was not a result of me being directly involved with the industry, nor was I claiming the corporation was 'responsible', but rather that I was analyzing how the corporation builds and presents itself according to an idea of responsibility.

This widespread depiction of ethnographers of corporations is based on unfortunate assumptions. First, it assumes that anthropologists are incapable of looking critically at the subject of their research. Second, it rejects empathizing with corporate employees as if they are passive and uncritical subjects whose feelings and ideologies are somehow contaminating. Third, it seems to imply that the CSR apparatus only transforms local communities, overlooking changes in the organizations themselves: how CSR is embedded in corporate cultures, how corporation-community relations become increasingly standardized, and how CSR principles constrain the daily work of employees and the mining operation.

In effect, conducting ethnographic research of CSR has led anthropologists (including me) to reflect on incorrect assumptions about corporate employees, communities, and the nature of the encounters between them. Ethnographies of CSR evidence that corporation-community relations should not be look at exclusively in terms of communities' oppression, co-optation, or dependence. Sally Babidge's (2013) studied a partnership between an indigenous community in the Atacama Desert and a BHP mining company, showing that by engaging with CSR, communities actively negotiate public services and infrastructure the state does not provide. She demonstrates that tensions between the community and the corporation emerged from the different understandings and expectations of what being *socios* [partners] meant, rather than because of the actual presence of the extractive industries. This image challenges stereotypes of indigenous communities as opposed to mining and recognizes the agency of local communities. Fabiana Li (2015) makes a similar point when showing how actors are trying to reach agreements for the compensation of water loss in irrigation canals affected by the Yanacocha mine in Peru. Both examples demonstrate that CSR ethnography is a productive avenue to understand the complexities of extractive contexts.

However, the question concerning anthropologists' engagements with actors in the controversial encounters of CSR remains open. As I have already suggested, the notion of anthropologists' fuzzy embeddedness with corporations offers the theoretical potential to highlight ethnographic work in corporations in the context of CSR, perhaps shedding light on the ways in which CSR legitimizes extractivism and conceals forms of violence. Catherine Coumans (2011) first mentioned this notion briefly to describe academically engaged anthropologists who have "independent funding for their mining-related research but accept logistical support in the form of housing or transport from the mine" (Coumans 2011: 33). For Coumans, such fuzzy embeddedness might give "unique insider perspectives and information",

in the same way that

> "journalists embedded with troops gain access to experiences and information that would be difficult to obtain as independent journalists […] However, like embedded journalists, their ability to publicize those insights or perspectives may be restricted, and their reporting may be biased by their operating environment" (Coumans 2011: 33).

Marina Welker (2014) elaborates on Coumans' argument in her ethnography of Newmont Mining Corporation and the Batu Hijau Copper and Gold Mine in Indonesia.[2] Welker's work, another key reference for the anthropology of CSR, consisted of spending a summer in Newmont corporate headquarters in Denver and several months on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, living in villages near Newmont's Batu Hijau mine. Welker narrates that during her time in Indonesia, she often received logistical support from the corporation, shared meals and recreation with company officials, participated in meetings or conversations deemed confidential, had a badge to enter the mining complex at will, and received health care when needed. She says that she often felt puzzled – what reminds me of my feeling of awkwardness – as she was well aware of the negative images of anthropologists working with corporations. However, she notes that mining is omnipresent in the region, already deeply embedded, for example, through the polluted air and water, the communications networks, and the paved roads built by the company.

According to Welker (2014), villagers were more concerned with the distribution of corporate resources, like royalties and employment, than with their origin's morality. Therefore – in contrast to academics and activists – the villagers did not question her close involvement with the company. Welker explains that in the web of relations around Newmont's Batu Hijau mine, people already enact ideas that represent the company as a subject of responsibility for alleviating the inequalities it has created. Newmont officials' efforts to implement the insights of the CSR movement interacted and conflicted with these local ideas and practices for moralizing the company (Welker 2014: 12).

Welker's depiction is insightful and points to the interdependences, collaborations, and omnipresence of mining corporations in their areas of influence. However, she does not elaborate on how – aside from the logistical support received – the anthropologist becomes 'embedded' with the corporation. She also does not elaborate on her positionality derived from her close relationship with corporate subjects. I discuss how addressing these issues through the idea of fuzzy embeddedness has further conceptual potential. I understand fuzzy embeddedness as unintended, temporary, ambiguous, and often unacknowledged. It produces a sense of awkwardness as the ethnographer does not (necessarily) share the aims and ideology of mining corporations and tries to remain distant and independent while becoming entangled in corporate logics in subtle ways. This ambiguous relationship involves ethical and intellectual challenges for the ethnographer. In what follows, I present reflections of my ethnographic work in La Guajira to reflect on the fuzzy ways in which I became entangled with the corporation.

[2] Welker (2014) explores what she calls the different enactments of the corporation. Inspired by Science and Technology Studies literature, and specifically by Annemarie Mol's (2002) idea of multiple objects, Welker discusses how a corporation can appear so differently to different groups of people, yet at the same time remain a coherent unity.

Cerrejón in La Guajira, from Paternalism to Non-Voluntary CSR

The mining operation in La Guajira began in the early 1980s when it was established as a joint venture between the Colombian state and ExxonMobil with the promise to be the anchor of regional development. From the beginning of the operation, the mining company – through its social management division or corporate foundations – offered agriculture and handicraft projects for the Wayuu communities, introduced microcredit to promote entrepreneurship in local towns, and donated money for health, education and small infrastructure projects. With a few transformations over the decades, there has always been some version of what we today call CSR, a concept that started to appear in corporate reports and magazines in the late 1990s.

In the early 2000s, in line with neoliberal reforms, the Colombian state and ExxonMobil sold their shares to three multinational mining giants: Anglo American, BHP, and Glencore, who established a separate company called Cerrejón to run the mine. Around the same time, the state extended the concession to exploit the Cerrejón deposit for another 20 years, up to 2034. The 'new owners' [*los nuevos dueños o accionistas*] – as they were called in interviews – attempted to distance themselves from the social conflicts initiated by their predecessors. They initiated a 'third party review' of their social relations that resulted in the change of the company's brand, and the deployment of what they called the *Strategy of Responsible Mining.* As part of this strategy, the company enlarged the CSR division, announced the adoption of international social and environmental standards, and publicized their 'transformation' in the media and with local communities. Soon after, the company launched ambitious and controversial expansion plans involving the diversion of rivers. These projects have galvanized a strong opposition to the extractive industry that challenges the 'responsible mining' discourse, calls for a transition to a post-extractivist economy, and denounces the negative social and environmental impacts of the mine (Carmona & Jaramillo 2020).

However, conflicts between the mine and local communities are not at all new. The corporation's failure to respond to societal expectations about development and poverty reduction and its direct and subtle forms of repression and violence – evidenced in decades of slow dispossession, deterioration of local ecosystems, pollution, and marginalization of Black and indigenous communities – have fueled tensions, conflict, and sometimes violent confrontations.

This last aspect presents us with an important issue concerning CSR functioning in La Guajira. Although the global discourse of CSR rests on self-regulation and voluntarism as a core idea of the concept (Shamir 2010), corporate social management is hardly voluntary. On the contrary, CSR in the sites of extraction is seen as a necessity for the smooth functioning of the mining operation. This was explained to me by a high-level executive while discussing the transformation of the idea of CSR within the company:

> "Now the idea that social responsibility is voluntary is over. They [communities] already demand it as if it were part of the law. It becomes mandatory. It is a day-to-day issue; it is what ensures you operate. If it [CSR] was not implemented, blockages would make it impossible to operate the mine […] I would not see it possible to function" (Interview 29.07.2016).

Without a doubt, disruptions to the operation of the train – a 150 km open railroad that passes through Wayuu territory – are a real threat for the business, and are therefore perceived as a

menace by employees. During 2016, the year I visited the mine, there were at least 70 blockages of the train line and double that number of attempts. Lawsuits are another ubiquitous threat that the corporation faces and tries to prevent through negotiated agreements and maintaining an amicable climate with communities in the areas of influence. These extreme examples illustrate how CSR for this company is not an underfunded marginal subdivision but a necessity; it has become increasingly sophisticated through the years and largely effective in dealing with upset communities. In this sense, CSR functions as a strategy for the pacification and disciplining of protesters that has the effect of protecting the company's reputation and perceptions of its legitimacy by different stakeholders. CSR is successful to the degree that it guarantees that responsibilities over negative environmental and social impacts are discussed and problems are resolved on terms and through procedures that are acceptable for the company.

In this way, we can observe how the mine has sustained itself partly thanks to the CSR discourse, something that not only demonstrates that there is a *business case* for CSR, but also that the social projects run by the company have turn out to be one of the channels through which the mine has become economically, materially, and culturally entangled in La Guajira (Carmona 2019). In what follows, I elaborate on my work in the corporation to review how these entanglements take place and how the ethnographer is caught in its functioning.

Approaching the Field

The first time I saw the Cerrejón mine was during my first visit to La Guajira as a master's student researching a dam project in 2012. I observed for the first time how the mine was present in the communities' daily life not only through the acute transformation of the landscape, the mine dumping sites, the daily explosions, the railroad, and the passing train visible on the horizon but also through some version of CSR social programs. Even brief visits to the Wayuu communities in the mine's area of influence were sufficient to see the corporate slogan *Minería responsible* [Responsible Mining] on buildings, windmills, and water tanks.

About two years later, I participated in another research project concerning the controversies surrounding the mine's expansion.[3] We observed how, during these controversies, the mining company used CSR and the *responsible mining* rhetoric to secure its expansion projects, for example, to obtain the consent of indigenous or Black groups during prior consultation procedures.[4] At the same time, the company released statements openly warning [the social movement called it blackmail] that if the expansion projects did not go through, there would be fewer taxes, royalties, social investment, and no new employment. As part of this research project, I visited the region on several occasions, working closely with activist organizations, attending forums and other events against mining, and interviewing affected communities. At the time, I tried to approach the company for interviews and received no

[3] This project was called Regímenes de Intervención económica y conocimientos expertos en Colombia, and was financed by the Universidad de Los Andes and Universidad de Antioquia, 2015. I conducted fieldwork with two other colleagues from the Universidad de Los Andes. The mine expansion project that was being discussed at the time implied the diversion of a stream, adding one more to the several water sources that had already been interfered with and sometimes destroyed to make room for the mining pits. Several sectors of society have opposed the project expressing concern about water.

[4] Colombia is signatory to ILO (International Labour Organization) convention 169, which stablishes the right to prior consultation for ethnic minorities.

response; the mine appeared to me like an impenetrable place for anthropologists, at least for those asking about controversies and conflict.

For my doctoral research, I decided to study CSR practices. Following my advisor's suggestion, I accepted a two-month consultancy with the engineering faculty of my university to evaluate the extent to which explosives in the mining operation affected houses in the vicinities of the Cerrejón mine. The study was carried out as an agreement between affected communities and the company's CSR department – but financed by the latter – in an attempt to resolve a long-standing dispute. I took the role of a 'social expert' to work by the side of seismic engineers. This was not a *fuzzy*, but a *direct* engagement with the corporation that I anticipated would be an opportunity to contact the company and later come back as an ethnographer. Still, even though I mentioned my aims, no one seemed willing to help me get access.

Assuming that the company would remain inaccessible, I planned my project as an ethnography of Wayuu communities' experiences with CSR projects. However, in a last attempt not to set aside the company's perspective, I wrote to the CSR manager introducing my project and asking for an interview, attaching letters from the university and my funding institution (the Colombian Institute for Anthropology and History, ICANH), and assuring him that my research was purely academically motivated. To my surprise and against all my predictions, he answered positively. Soon afterwards, I received a call from an executive from the CSR department who, from then on, helped me plan interviews with CSR officers in Bogota – the country's capital – and in La Guajira. She further suggested that I spend a month living in the mine's residential facilities – a well-equipped enclave reserved for top employees and their families, most of them foreign to the region – so that I could have first-hand access to their work. In less than two weeks, I found myself at the heart of the Cerrejón mine, and my fuzzy embeddedness began.[5]

Ethnography During a Performance of 'Transparency'

During my first weeks at the company, the CSR executive arranged my scheduled, and I was happy to let her do so. She also requested me to send a weekly report so the company could keep track of my activities. I agreed to the company rules, which I did not interpret as an intrusion into my work, but as part of the corporate practices which I needed to experience and record myself. CSR employees, after all, are requested by their managers to provide regular reports of their activities and expenses so this environment of highly controlled and disciplined work applied to us all. Later, I got more freedom to move around on my own; I made acquaintances, and shared the social life of the compound.

As the company was to a large extent managing my access to CSR practices, I came to understand my presence there as part of the performance of 'transparency' that characterizes the enactment of CSR. As pointed out by geographer Andrew Barry (2013) in his work about the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, transparency is a key concept in the extractive industries. Its practice involves making available large amounts of information about extractive

[5] I lived in the mine's residential compound for a month. My ethnography of CSR also included observations in communities near the railroad and the port, the "experimental farm", events related to the mine expansion plan, and a two-day CSR congress in Bogota. I conducted interviews with government officials in the cities of Riohacha—capital of La Guajira—and Bogota. I also collected and analyzed documents reporting CSR practices, such as sustainability reports, corporate magazines and social media posts.

projects, emphasizing that this might help counter the effects of the 'resource curse' and encourage civil society participation. Mechanisms of the performance of transparency in the Cerrejón mine included the publication of sustainability reports, signing voluntary standards and agreements, opening the compound for touristic and educational visits, and – why not? – allowing researchers to conduct ethnographic research of CSR practices.

In line with the idea of transparency, I was never asked to sign confidentiality agreements, nor was I asked to keep any information to myself or to speak in favor of the mine. Therefore, I concluded that everything that they showed me was public and that they expected me, even wanted me, to see it. Therefore, as an ethnographer, I had to pay attention to the *regime of visibility* that was presented to me. In other words, in the ethnography of CSR, the analysis has to focus not only on what is observed but also on the suppositions, absences, and silences that are also 'present'. As Barry (2013) suggests, the performance of transparency in the extractive industries aims at containing the shape and the development of public debates by rendering the discussion as informed and rational. By defining the means and the indicators through which the company is to be evaluated, corporations define a specific regime of visibility. Then, transparency and openness are as much about what is not shown as what is (Garsten & de Montoya 2008).

I often had more direct hints of the framing of my presence as part of CSR. After an interview with two corporate managers in late 2016, during which we shared dinner, one of them half-joked, half-asked his colleague about getting the cost of dinner reimbursed in the name of "meeting with stakeholder." During another interview, a manager made it more explicit, saying: "since the 2000s, our shareholders have a policy of open doors. That is why we accept students like you. We accept students all the time, but sometimes we just can't cope with so many." This way, I realized that as an ethnographer, I was not only describing CSR but also, and more importantly, participating in its *making*. This is the core implication of the anthropologist's fuzzy embeddedness with the corporation. My relationship with the company turned out to be an enactment of CSR, often without me noticing the ways in which this happened.

Doing Ethnography from a Privileged Space

A second implication of the fuzzy embeddedness with corporations is that the ethnographer's positionality is necessarily entangled with that of the CSR staff while visiting local communities. In my experience, these power dynamics revealed the languages and imaginaries with which corporate employees represent the local communities and exposed an 'affective' dimension elicited by a context of outrageous inequality that motivates employees' engagement with the CSR discourse and practice.

During my stay at the residential compound, I rented a room in the family house of an engineer who had worked for the company for more than 30 years. The compound had all the facilities a family might need: a constant supply of water and electricity, private security, a bilingual school, recreational and sports facilities including a football pitch and a semi-Olympic pool, restaurants, a bar, a supermarket, a health center with access to medical specialists and more. These might all sound like standard infrastructure. However, no town in La Guajira enjoys such facilities.

Living in the compound, I had first-hand experience not only of the contrasts between the inside and the outside of the compound, but I also understood how employees experienced it. My perspective contrasts with Kirsch's (2014) idea that over-empathizing with employees

is a risk for the quality of the ethnography. On the contrary, I believe that ethnographers can critically analyze their own feelings of empathy and apathy, comfort and discomfort, and write stories that reflect the contrasts and paradoxes of these encounters.

These feelings are a manifestation of what anthropologist Gisa Weszkalnys (2016) calls *resource affects*, or the emotional responses related to natural resources prospecting and extraction. *Resource affects* are not seen as "an anti-economic response but as one force among many that give economies their specific shape, while also being shaped by them" (ibid.: 128). Although resource affects are more commonly observable in the local communities' feelings of hope, fear, frustration, or disillusionment, there is no reason to think that corporate employees' affects are not key in shaping corporation–society relations. Empathizing with corporate employees, another form of fuzzy embeddedness, is then an advantaged way to understand the affective dimensions that keep CSR running.

People living within the compound – like my host family – thought of the *outside,* specifically the Wayuu territories, as dangerous, 'undeveloped', full of conflictive backward people in need of education and aid. The urban areas were often described as having been captured by corrupt local elites who did not invest well the money that the mine paid in taxes and royalties and who were primarily responsible for the failure of the coal industry to fulfill its developmental promise. Representation of the outside fluctuated between feelings of fear and pity, often referring to the Colombian state as absent and justifying the presence of the mining company as the only actor that was doing something to overcome the problems. In this way, I learned that through CSR, the company can represent itself as the entity that brings solutions to problems such as water scarcity, hunger, corruption, patronage, dependence on the extractive industry, and others – many of which the presence of the extractive industry has contributed to creating or aggravating.

Anthropologist Hanna Appel (2012) refers to a comparable situation in the case of oil enclaves in Africa. She conceptualizes the enclave as a form of infrastructural violence where CSR functions to disentangle the people living *inside* the privileged walls from the reality *outside*. Appel argues that by focusing on bringing solutions instead of analyzing causes, CSR helps the corporation and its employees to abdicate responsibility for the social problems of host regions. CSR then is the mechanism that connects the enclave economy and the region, the corporation and the distant – yet so close – 'others'.

CSR executives fulfill the crucial role of brokering between the inside and the outside. The CSR executives are the human face of the 'corporate personhood'[6] that interacts and often conflicts with communities and local authorities in the company's name, a task that they consider exhausting and sometimes frustrating. However, conflict is only part of the picture. CSR executives also get to feel good about bringing projects and resources to 'poor' families. A widespread comment was that the beneficiaries of CSR programs would have probably never got an education, infrastructure, and employment if it were not for the company. Even though the origins and hierarchies involved in this salvation rhetoric need to be problematized, it is true that for many households, CSR does bring concrete opportunities

[6] When speaking of corporate personhood or of the corporate person, I refer to the legal notion that companies have legal rights and responsibilities, independently of the individual human beings that are part of it. This gives corporations the right to sign contracts, to sue or be sued, and have legal continuity over time. As suggested by Robert Foster (2014), within CSR, the 'corporate personhood' obtains a more prominent role and visibility. Foster points out that CSR makes it easier to think of corporations as human partners, "to animate them with the moral virtues of people committed to others" (ebd.: 248).

and solutions to everyday problems. This translated into a pragmatic acceptance/legitimacy (Suchman 1995) of the company's presence as embodied by CSR executives.

It is true that, parallel to personal motivations, CSR executives are aligned with corporate objectives through diverse means, such as a contract, performance indicators, an annual bonus and other economic incentives. In my experience, they were also conscious that CSR and community management generally aim to facilitate and support the extraction, transportation, loading of ships, and export of coal. However, it would be misleading to claim that economic incentives alone account for employees' engagement with the corporation and the extractive industries more generally. In my experience, for employees, the feelings associated with contributing to communities, and the power and prestige that it imbued them with, were important motivations for their jobs and consequently an essential fuel for CSR functioning. While accompanying CSR officials in their daily work, I saw them distribute food, sign up people for food deliveries, install solar panels, repair community infrastructure, and many other things. I saw local people hug and thank them, and enthusiastically participate in corporate programs. It was easy to feel good about bringing some, albeit minor, positive change to communities. However, the CSR employees' 'best intentions' need to be analyzed as they are also inextricably embedded within the enactment of the corporation and the extractive industry. I will elaborate on this point in the next section.

CSR Employers and the Human Face of the Company

CSR executives' daily work consists of coming and going between their houses in the comfortable residential enclave and fieldwork in the communities. As my own fieldwork consisted of being by their side, I also transited this border between the idealized bubble of the mining compound and the communities (a very literal one, fenced with wired cable and surveilled with security cameras). I shared with them the same codes, the same language, and a similar look, so when I was taken for one of them, I understood that being non-indigenous, upper-middle-class, highly educated from the center of the country already distanced me from the Wayuu. Besides that, I was going around side by side with people who have the power to give or withhold corporate gifts or access to social programs. For communities, I was not just a curious outsider who came to visit the region, but one that came with the mine and all the power that it implied. Therefore, I was entangled in the power relations that the CSR builds in the region every day, and that the CSR executives represent.

That my fieldwork involved collaborations with the corporation was only to be expected. I reciprocated employees' willingness to have me observing their work by helping during community meetings, distributing snacks and lunch, taking notes, participating in workshops, and taking pictures. However, I had to remind myself that my fuzzy embeddedness was not only with well-intentioned employees but also with the functioning of corporate power. This was salient when interviewees asked for my opinion and recommendations on improving community relations or conducting more efficient programs or projects. While for me it felt like talking to people like myself, concerned with doing their job the best they could, these requests faced me with the dilemma of how, through these 'innocent' interactions, I might be helping the corporation. I also faced these ethical dilemmas during conversations about the opposition movement that I knew in depth from previous research projects, and I refrained from interviewing local leaders and activists while I was working directly with the CSR employees. I negotiated these dimensions of my fuzzy embeddedness on the

spot, sometimes maintaining more extended conversations, giving some opinions, and sharing my impressions, and sometimes sidestepping the issue, avoiding getting too involved in discussions by saying that I was still getting to know the context and I had more to learn from my interviewees than the other way around, which was how I actually felt. I was frequently asked about my opinion on the mine, and I always openly said that I thought coal mining needs to be downscaled, sooner rather than later, and that La Guajira needs to start enacting a post-extractive future.

For CSR officers, dealing with conflict and criticism was an inherent part of working in the extractive industries. Even though I was not being given any sensitive information, there seemed to be an implicit presumption that I was going to criticize the company. Sometimes, my closest group of acquaintances joked about seeing me years later speaking against the company as the head of an environmentalist NGO. They told me stories of disappointment about researchers or journalists whom they had welcomed and who ended up writing negative depictions of the company. They also discussed and lamented the negative depiction of coal mining in the media. Confronting the corporation was, in many ways, confronting them. They assumed their roles as representatives of the corporation and self-identified with it: 'the Cerrejón family' was an idea commonly invoked, although not uncritically.

One CSR executive illustrated this identification with an anecdote. She had become friends with a well-known Wayuu leader from one of the communities in the area of influence. The leader often told the employee that she hated Cerrejón, and she refused to talk to anyone in the company – except for this CSR executive! During one crucial meeting with a manager, the Wayuu leader demanded her presence – a low-rank executive who was not initially invited. The executive knew this was a contradiction and later that day told the leader, "You say you don't want to speak to Cerrejón, but I am Cerrejón." The leader answered saying: "no, you are not the same. You are different."

To sum up, the stated objectives of CSR which include that the company contributes to sustainable development, cannot be disentangled from the aim to profit from coal extraction, because they are both inherently linked. The broad pragmatic idea that the corporation can be 'beneficial' for the region because it is deeply committed with CSR practices and standards implies the acceptance of a trade-off with the long-term consequences of extractivism. But this pragmatic acceptance goes beyond survival and necessity; it is also fueled by feelings of identification, affects, assigned meanings and experiences of CSR for specific people at different moments during the constant interaction between local communities and corporate employees. CSR has become a successful discourse to justify the extractive industries, as it manages to fuse itself with local identities and everyday life.

Conclusions

CSR has become an anthropological problem requiring novel ways of ethnographic experimentation and concept making. In this article, I have elaborated on how ethnographers studying CSR and the extractive industries engage with mining corporations. I have elaborated on the concept of fuzzy embeddedness to refer to the ambiguous and temporary ways in which ethnographers become part of the practices, logics, and power relations they are researching.

My approach is traditional in the sense that I conducted localized fieldwork during which I shared with a group or community – the corporate employees – daily life and conversations.

I participated in and observed their practices, and sought to understand their inner categories, ways of thinking, and the underlying logics of their social life. However, I have argued that the ethnography of CSR needs to account for how ethnographers may become entangled in the logics and functioning of the phenomenon they observe, considering that CSR success relies on embedding the company in the daily life of local communities. I have widened the idea of anthropologists' fuzzy embeddedness with corporations to reflect on such aspects.

I have pointed to how ethnography in the corporation involves a constant negotiation over how much to collaborate with employees and a constant transitioning between the inside and the outside of the corporation, carrying the symbolic charges associated with having access to corporate offices and fancy residential compounds. As CSR is deployed from a space of privilege, the shared fieldwork with corporate executives calls for a reflection on the ethnographer's positionality. This experience can translate into an ethnography of privilege itself that accounts for the representations and emotions that bridge the inside and the outside of the corporation, and morally disentangles elites from the problematic consequences of inequality.

I have also pointed out that fuzzy embeddedness with the corporation implies empathizing with CSR corporate employees and understanding the affective dimension that sustains CSR. Furthermore, I have shown how the opening of corporate gates to ethnographers is part of the corporate performance of transparency entangling the ethnography with the enactment of the CSR. In other words, in the ethnography of CSR from the corporate perspective, the ethnographer is not only there to document a cultural practice; the fact that she is there at all is possible because of the principles of the practice itself.

Paying attention to my fuzzy embeddedness with the corporation allowed me to maintain critical reflexivity about my own work. I was able to conceptualize contradictory feelings and doubts I had during my fieldwork and to understand crucial aspects of the daily functioning, the routinized conflicts and paradoxes that surround CSR. I offer reflexivity as an antidote to anthropologists becoming imperceptibly complicit in phenomena that interest them academically but for which they do not share an ideological base. I hope that my methodological reflections will contribute to the consolidation of a critical thinking around CSR and its role in the reproduction of power relations and environmental crises associated with the seemingly unstoppable demand for natural resources

To look at situations of fuzzy embeddedness provides a point of entry to interrogate how organizational actors represent ethnographers and even use their presence in their favor, or to discuss ethical dilemmas during fieldwork. Beyond the extractive industries, my reflections aim to inspire ethnographers who increasingly find themselves fuzzily embedded in powerful institutions as we explore new ethnographic fields in modern societies.

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Situated Withnessing in/as Intervention: Co-Laborative, Ethnographic Long-Term Research with Social Psychiatry

Patrick Bieler

Abstract

As part of my research on the relations between mental health and urban environments in Berlin, Germany, I observed in and worked with a project that aims to improve living conditions for people with severe mental health problems facing an increasingly expensive and competitive housing market. Over the course of the project, I became an active member of the project rather than a 'mere' participant observer. This kind of engagement is based less on an ethical commitment to the research partners' moral and political goals than on generating situated empirical knowledge and concepts. Working with the project created situations of critical dialogue and confrontation from which analytical insights gradually emerged. This ultimately blurs the distinction between known and knowing subject(s), as well as those between observing, intervening and analyzing. Moreover, actively participating in this way serves as an ethnographic long-term intervention, which can produce novel research questions and methodological insights that may guide further research. The intervention's target is thus beyond locally observed problems. I will briefly illustrate this argument by discussing my contribution to the interdisciplinary field of urban mental health research.

Keywords: ethnographic analysis, co-laboration, withnessing, relational anthropology, urban mental health

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Introduction

In 2018, I participated in a meeting between community mental health care workers, a representative of private landlords, and a member of parliament for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany. The meeting was part of the Inclusion Project, a 5-year funded project on strategies for inclusive living for people with mental health problems, and was hosted by a national welfare organization. The Inclusion Project, which was one of the field sites for my doctoral research on the relations between mental health and urban environments, was a response to the increasing housing challenge faced by mental health care services. Due to rapidly increasing rents and a general lack of affordable housing in many German cities – as well as some rural areas – mental health care services have been confronted with the regular eviction of their clients, and have seen an increasing number of homeless people applying

for psychiatric assistance. As a result, the Inclusion Project's main aim was to establish alliances between mental health care services, representatives of housing corporations, private landlords, and political stakeholders.

During this particular meeting, one of the departmental heads from the welfare organization employed the phrase "hardware of inclusion" ("Hardware der Inklusion", fieldnotes, 20.03.2018), in order to emphasize the fact that the successful cohabitation of people with and without mental health problems was not only a question of available housing and social attitudes, but could also be fostered by particular material arrangements and objects. His suggestion did not provide concrete proposals, but served as a provocation: it challenged the arguments put forward by the employees of the community mental health care services, who had previously focused on reducing stereotypes and tackling the prejudices of landlords. In the departmental head's opinion, addressing the quantity of available housing, as well as people's individual attitudes, were not in themselves sufficient to ensure a decent standard of living arrangements for their clients. I agreed with him, and added that a report written by myself and the project manager supported his claims. When asked about problems and potential improvements regarding their living conditions in focus group interviews, mental health care clients had expressed wishes for basic decorative or practical objects, such as a bathtub or flower boxes, and asked for sound insulation to avoid conflict with neighbors. In addition, they had highlighted neighborhood arrangements such as green spaces, meeting areas, and public transport.

While this discussion had no immediate consequences in the meeting, it was of great significance for me as an ethnographer, because the departmental head had articulated limitations in his colleagues' approach, and by doing so had opened up the possibility of changing the Inclusion Project's course. Weeks later, in an attempt to unpack the analytical importance of the encounter, I recounted the conversation in a presentation to the Inclusion Project's team and the advisory board.[1] I thereby tried to provoke a discussion about the potential to establish future cooperation between social psychiatric services and private landlords by carefully designing neighborhood life (Imrie & Kullman 2017). To me, this seemed to be a chance to problematize two of the Inclusion Project's core ontological assumptions; firstly, that the integration of people with severe mental health problems into urban 'communities' is necessarily an issue of (tight-knit) 'social' relations between humans, and, secondly, that mental illness is an individual state within a person's body which creates a particular kind of behavior, separate from and independent of its environment. I hoped to initiate a joint reflection about the pitfalls of reproducing the dichotomy between 'the mentally ill' and 'the mentally sane', the structural antecedents that have constituted this reproduction, and the limitations that complicate more flexible provision of care under current housing market conditions. Moreover, I wanted to gain insight into the actors' knowledges of how the built environment affects people with mental health problems, and what – according to them – good cohabitation of people with and without the need for psychiatric assistance could look like.

[1] The project team consisted of members of community mental health care services in two German cities and two rural areas in Germany, mental health care clients, and a project manager (who was an employee of the welfare organization). Moreover, every six months an advisory board – comprising representatives of federal ministries, private landlords, the real estate industry, renters, and organizations for homeless people – met to evaluate the Inclusion Project's development and discuss further action.

In this paper, I use my involvement in the Inclusion Project as a vantage point for methodological reflection. I will depict how I gradually transformed from a participant observer of the Inclusion Project into a quasi-member, and demonstrate how I worked with the project while simultaneously trying to provoke discussions within it. After describing the Inclusion Project and my research process, I will discuss two interrelated implications: firstly, the blurring of distinctions between knowing and known subject(s) as well as the seemingly clear-cut spatial and temporal separation of observation (in fieldwork encounters), intervention (co-creating objects of analysis in and beyond fieldwork) and analysis (after fieldwork and away from the field). Working in and with (activist) interventions (such as the Inclusion Project) and feeding back observations and preliminary interpretative thoughts, I argue, serves as an ethnographic method: a means to learn from and with research partners through joint attempts to change problematic situations. Secondly, in this way, participating *in* an intervention functions *as* an intervention aiming at ethnographic knowledge production. Thus, an approach that sometimes sides with and sometimes criticizes research partners aims neither to intervene into the research partners' practices from an outside perspective nor to intervene on behalf of their interests, but rather to enhance ethnographic (as well as interdisciplinary) knowledge production by generating situated, distributed analyses from within fieldwork encounters. These can lead to situated concepts and be mobilized for methodological reconceptualization. This, I claim, is a long-term endeavor that targets the development of novel research questions and methodological approaches that can inform debates far beyond the problems of a local intervention. I will shortly illustrate this argument with an explication of my contribution to the interdisciplinary field of urban mental health research. Taken seriously, these methodological implications call for a broader problematization of ethnography as (usually) individual, short-term and project-based research.

Participation in the Inclusion Project

In my current research, I problematize the relation between urban life and mental health. My research is part of a long-term co-laborative research focus on psychiatric practices established at the Institute of European Ethnology (at HU Berlin). My initial research design was especially inspired by the concept of niching developed by Milena Bister, Martina Klausner and Jörg Niewöhner (2016). This concept enables an analysis of how people with mental health problems create bearable living conditions while navigating urban environments beyond their treatment in psychiatric institutions. While psychiatric institutions were the starting point and remained an important field site for Bister and colleagues, they also accompanied mental health care patients after their release from clinics. This enabled an analytical shift away from Foucauldian analyses of subjectivation through psychiatric classification and treatment – a common interpretive framework within the empirical study of psychiatric institutions. As their co-laborative partners in psychiatry were well aware of and familiar with this mode of critique, Bister and colleagues decided to confront them with "ethnographic material [which] demonstrates that much more goes on than can be captured solely by the vocabulary of control and resistance" (ibid.: 190). This confrontation could potentially create generative tensions between anthropological and social psychiatric thought styles.

Building on this co-laborative work in the field of psychiatry, I undertook extensive fieldwork with mental health care clients in the public realm (Lofland 1998). I started my research

with go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003).[2] However, I soon realized that the relations between mental health and urban environments cannot be fully understood through a sole focus on situated immersions in socio-material surroundings, because the daily routines of clients are shaped in large part by (emplaced) care infrastructures (Söderström et al. 2017) and broader social and political dynamics (Rose 2019). In order to capture this, I expanded my initial research focus by conducting participant observation and interviews in various branches of the community mental health care system of a local district in Berlin (community mental health care services, the social welfare office).

Particularly, I became interested in the topic of housing – which is simultaneously a necessary but scarce precondition of community mental health care provision and a highly influential factor determining clients' everyday exposures to urban life (Lancione & McFarlane 2016: 49). Hence, housing is entangled with and a vital element of clients' recovery processes. When I began my research, the lack of affordable housing in Berlin (Holm 2016) in conjunction with rapidly rising rental costs triggered gentrification processes in inner-city neighborhoods (Frank 2017; Lees 2008; Schulz 2017), which posed major problems for the psychiatric care system (Bieler & Klausner 2019b): mental health care clients were threatened by (potential) eviction from their homes, while the population of homeless people applying for mental health care services dramatically increased. This not only had an impact on the affected people themselves, but also posed problems for the mental health care services that provide apartments for their clients. On the one hand, the service providers were afraid of rental contract cancellations and their clients losing apartments, while on the other, their housing resources and work capacities were too limited to effectively deal with the situation.

In various sites in Berlin, mental health care service providers and public administration employees began to publicly lament and criticize these problems and started forming networks for political action. When I started my research at the end of 2015, I encountered the Inclusion Project, which had already been running for about a year at that time. This project explicitly addressed the aforementioned problems and translated them into public issues (Marres 2007) by fostering alliances with housing companies and political stakeholders – an attempt which has so far been unique in Germany (according to the project's self-description). These alliance building practices became a strategy to pursue the overall goal of the project: enhancing dwelling opportunities for people with severe mental health problems. However, the alliance building practices did not always have a clear and straightforward trajectory, since they entailed an inquiry into housing market actors' wishes, needs and practices.[3] Rather than simply demanding rights and resources, project participants assessed the problems and needs of mental health care clients, community mental health care services, and housing companies, and tried to establish possibilities for alliance building between housing companies and social policy stakeholders.

Before beginning my research, the manager of the Inclusion Project and I had agreed that I would be able to observe the regular meetings of the advisory board, as well as the meetings

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[2] Go-alongs are a mobile research method somewhere between participant observation and (narrative) interviews. Researchers follow their informants on their routes through urban environments (mostly walking together), observe the informant's embodied use of (public) places, and conduct conversations about perception, experiences, and memories. For a discussion of go-alongs as an iterative, long-term method see Bieler & Klausner 2019a.

[3] Moreover, these practices were continually debated within and beyond the project team, since there was often no consensus on solutions to the aforementioned problems.

of the local project team in Berlin. In return, she asked me to present my observations to the advisory board and team every now and then. Over the course of the research, my involvement in the Inclusion Project intensified. This began most noticeably when I started co-writing a report based on focus group interviews with mental health care clients. The interviews had been conducted by a private research institute for the project. My task was to analyze the interview material and, together with the project manager, deduce actionable recommendations from the results. From that point on, I found that I had access to otherwise confidential meetings with housing companies and political stakeholders. Even more importantly, my status within the Inclusion Project changed: I became a quasi-member of it. I accompanied the manager to various conferences, and we held joint presentations about the project results. I even stood in for her at one conference because she was unavailable. We discussed publications in specialized journals, as well as a leaflet informing actors across the housing market about potential cooperation with mental health care service providers. We co-wrote the final report of the Inclusion Project (including further policy recommendations), and I was involved in planning the project's closing conference.

Co-working, however, did not mean to "go 'native'" (O'Reilly 2009: 87). Although I took over the tasks of a regular team member at times, it was always clear to everyone that I was at the same time conducting research. Throughout my involvement in the project, I actively emphasized the differences between the Inclusion Project members' thought styles and my own ethnographic way of thinking. In my regular presentations, I not only informed the advisory board and project team of my observations, but also tried to involve them in ongoing discussions regarding both the potential and the limitations of their mutual cooperation. This distinction was formally indicated by the titles of my presentations, such as "Discussing the outside perspective of an anthropologist", or "Preliminary ethnographic conclusions of the project results". Finally, I was able to present my "social scientific view on the project" in the concluding conference, as well as in the final report. In addition, co-writing the two reports that featured recommendations for action, co-presenting the results at conferences, and co-designing the final conference for the Inclusion Project itself allowed for even more direct forms of dialogue. Overall, I was directly confronted with the ways in which the project team dealt with, legitimized, and problematized practical obligations and pressures, while I was simultaneously able to confront the project team with (often) divergent, ethnographically informed readings of the situation and to construe complementing or alternative conclusions.

Preparing presentations to the advisory board and project team, as well as co-working with the project manager, were important, tentative, analytical steps carried out during the ethnographic fieldwork process. These presentations also offered a chance to mobilize my ethnographic knowledge in ongoing interventions: they were my attempt to contribute to the Inclusion Project's overall aim of improving the living conditions of people with mental health problems by both questioning its rationalities and trying to provide perspectives that had not been considered relevant thus far. Specific analytical topics gradually crystallized as I prepared my ethnographic reading of observations in order to provoke discussion or to argue in co-working situations, even though the empirical material had not been fully processed.

Our recurring discussions did not only impact the Inclusion Project's work and conclusions, but also shaped my own analytical work. Taking up the discussion on the "hardware of inclusion" that I introduced in the beginning of this article, for instance, allowed two different things at once. Firstly, I could convince the project manager to include a section on the

necessity of planning and developing urban neighborhoods in the final report for the welfare organization. Importantly, this implied a shift from a focus on social relations between humans to the design of socio-material arrangements – introducing atmospheres and infrastructures as topics of community mental health care, aspects that have so far been marginal if not completely absent from mental health care. Secondly, the particular fieldwork situation itself, and my subsequent attempts to reflect upon it, were of analytical and conceptual importance. These prompted me to question the nature of social relations in neighborhoods in two ways: on the one hand it became clear that neighborhood sociality is not to be equated with dense (and generally harmonious) social networks (as the notion of community suggests), and on the other hand I needed to work with a concept that could account for more-than-human sociality when analyzing the relation between urban life (and particularly neighborhood cohabitation) and mental health. Consequently, my involvement in the project had a strong impact on elaborating and sharpening my main analytical concept: the (urban) encounter.

In the remaining pages of this article, I will reflect upon my approach with regard to the relations between ethnographer and research partners, as well as those between observing, analyzing and intervening. I argue that participating in an intervention such as the Inclusion Project is not an end to ethnography, but a means to jointly generate situated and distributed knowledge. This, I claim, is itself an ethnographic intervention that aims at the production of novel insights and analytical as well as methodological enhancements. Subsequently, I illustrate the argument by explaining how far the concept of encounter(ing) contributes to interdisciplinary debates on urban mental health research.

Blurring the Distinctions between Observing, Intervening, and Analyzing

In cultural and social anthropology, participant observation is *the* core method of research (Spradley 1980; Breidenstein et al. 2013). Based on active participation within a research field, ethnographic knowledge production is necessarily an interactive endeavor, produced in and through encounters with interlocutors (Lindner 1981; Boyer 2014). Specific in my case was that I supported my interlocutors in their attempts to overcome a problematic and complex situation. I joined them in actively intervening into mental health care design and urban politics, trying to change conditions for the better. This is a somewhat common procedure in forms of participatory research (Bergold & Thomas 2012) or militant anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995), in which acting ethically on behalf of the interests of interlocutors and building alliances with activists guides the ethnographic endeavor. However, while in these modes of knowledge production intervening into the world (by targeting injustices) and formulating political claims serves as the "primary rationale for research" (Marcus 2018: xiii), I understand my engagement first and foremost as an analytical method: "a simultaneous attention to the engagement of actors and practices […] *and* to reflexive learning from those actors and practices" (Downey & Zuiderent-Jerak 2017: 225).

My participation in the Inclusion Project's intervention – understood as the production of new realities in messy, non-linear and surely non-homogeneous attempts to achieve transformation (in this case through forging alliances with housing market actors) – was not a strategically planned objective of my research, but rather a methodological opportunity I grasped when it appeared. In this case, participating in an ongoing intervention was a means

to enhance ethnographic knowledge production (Binder 2018): I *collaborated* with my research partners. Compared to 'conventional' participant observation or modes of ethical knowledge production, collaboration implies shifting from a relatively hierarchical to a more symmetrical relationship: the research subjects are taken not only as knowledgeable key informants but also as epistemic partners whose potential to reflect on the conditions of their own practices is of analytical value (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018). Participating in such an intervention, then, is not necessarily motivated by an ethical commitment to the research subjects, and it is not dependent on agreement with their political agenda.[4]

Highlighting the special epistemic potential for ethnographic knowledge production, George Marcus and colleagues (e.g., Holmes & Marcus 2005) have offered the metaphorical para-site as a methodological concept, which describes "a bounded space of orchestrated interaction that is both within the activities of a particular fieldwork project and markedly outside or alongside it" (Deeb & Marcus 2011: 52). In this context, the research partners are "open to risking interpretations together with the researcher about ideas fundamental to the political organization of their institutional contexts and functions" (ibid.). With the label co-laboration – which both relates to Marcus and colleagues' methodological claim and draws from a critique of integrative modes of interdisciplinary research (Barry & Born 2013) – Jörg Niewöhner (2016) has proposed to pay particular analytical attention to the clashes between thought styles, actively embracing, and potentially even creating them, within and beyond fieldwork.

Co-laboration is not a completely distinctive genre of ethnographic knowledge production. It requires the collection of empirical material through 'classic' ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation or interviewing, and it operates via the epistemic differences between ethnographer and interlocutors. However, these differences are not taken into account as empirical material that can be interpreted "after the fact" (Knecht 2012: 264) from spatially and temporally safe distances. Rather, analytical insights and epistemic differences emerge from engaging with and involving oneself in the practices of interlocutors, not by withdrawing from the field and using concepts to alienate oneself from these experiences (e.g. Amann & Hirschauer 1997).

I pursued this goal by working together with the members of the Inclusion Project, in particular by co-writing reports and elucidating policy recommendations. While this meant temporarily co-working with my research partners from time to time, I also offered my own observations to the members of the Inclusion Project, and confronted them with critical questions based on my ethnographic perspective. Rather than being a seamless fit between ethnographer and epistemic partners, then, my co-laboration in the Inclusion Project was characterized by "tentative situations in which anthropologists […] are drawn into intense interventions in the field, at times working smoothly with counterparts, at other times clashing with them" (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018: 10). In this way, I performatively co-constituted objects and situations that had an impact on the practices of the Inclusion Project: I "*participated* in the production of the very things I was studying" (Marrero-Guillamón 2018:

[4] Liburkina (this issue) rightfully observes that my way of conducting research in and with the Inclusion Project was simplified by (and maybe even dependent on) a minimum of shared understandings of specific (political) problems and injustices and, more broadly, a commitment to scientific practice by my research partners. In her article she shows very well why and how collaboration (and especially co-laboration) could and should also be possible with opposing actors. My argument on withnessing as intervention is convergent with her claim that the target of ethnographic interventions is not limited to the dyadic relations with individual research partners.

183, emphasized by the author). By "empirically unpacking" (Zuiderent-Jerak 2016: 75) this process, my involvement became part of my ongoing, gradual analysis (Bieler et al. 2021b). Elsewhere, colleagues and I have discussed such a mode of co-laboration as decentering the subject of ethnographic knowledge production: rather than the act of an isolated individual interpreting observations (the ethnographer), the practice of reflecting observations and developing analytical ideas is distributed among a network of actors (Bieler et al. 2021a). In accordance with insights from practice theory and material-semiotics, we highlight that interpretation and reflection are situated and distributed processes rather than unique (mental) capacities of the modern scholar. Here, I wish to emphasize the temporal dimension of this problematization: co-laboration questions the seemingly clear-cut separation of observation and analysis; not only is the division between the knowing and informing subject blurred, but the linear succession of and spatial separation between observation and interpretation is suspended (Corsín Jiménez 2003).[5] As a result, the distinction between acting on the world (intervention) and knowing it (analysis) is transcended as well (Zuiderent-Jerak 2015). The active engagement in, with, and in contrast to the field generates an ethnographic analysis in an iterative way, while simultaneously shifting the intervention practices that the ethnographer is part of. Following Estrid Sørensen (2009: 134), co-laboration in intervention introduces a shift from witnessing to situated *with*nessing – "participat[ing] carefully in the socio-material knowledge and contribut[ing] to its continuous gradual mutation".

Crucial to Sørensen's argument is that situated withnessing is not limited to the immediate, embodied presence of the ethnographer in fieldwork situations. Supporting and changing ongoing interventions to solve problems is neither the final aim nor end point of engagement but an important step in developing concepts that are neither too close nor too distant from situated problematizations. Thus, participating *in* the Inclusion Project's intervention also functioned *as* intervention into ethnographic and interdisciplinary knowledge production aiming at "the production of new […] knowledge and […] the production of new normativity" (Zuiderent-Jerak 2016: 76).

Hence, by siding with my research partners, I was interested less in solving their problems than I was in contributing to the transformation of ethnographic knowledge production by developing concepts as well as discussing methodological implications for further research. With concepts and methodological enhancements that I partially derive from my fieldwork with the Inclusion Project, I am able to relate to ongoing ethnographic and interdisciplinary knowledge production on the topic of urban mental health. Thus, the ethnographic intervention that I pursue is a long-term endeavor that draws on and enhances what Stefan Beck (2008) has called a relational anthropology:

> "a new kind of research pragmatics, systematically designed for interdisciplinary cooperation, which organizes and makes fruitful relationships between different knowledge systems, thought styles and modes of research" (ibid.: 198; own translation).

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[5] I have written of co-working when describing the actual instances of joint work on the project (writing reports, giving presentations for the project etc.). Collaboration, or co-laboration, is a methodological abstraction that I use to describe the full process of my engagement, including reflection upon the relations between ethnographer and informants/epistemic partners as well as those between observation, intervention, and analysis. As I will continue to argue, co-laboration also extends beyond the immediate fieldsites and aims to intervene into different (scientific) discourses.

Co-laborative Anthropology of Urban Mental Health: a Long-Term Intervention

So far, I have described the process of my involvement with the Inclusion Project, which gradually developed into a form of co-laboration blurring two conventional separations of ethnographic research: the split between knowing and known subjects (that is, between the ethnographer and informants) as well as the spatial and temporal distinction between participating (including observing *and* making) and analyzing. As I have demonstrated, this resulted in the inclusion of certain ethnographic findings in the publications and recommendations of the Inclusion Project, while simultaneously altering my own analytical understanding.

One crucial concept I was able to develop through my withnessing in the Inclusion Project was the above-mentioned concept of encounter(ing), which facilitates attendance to the specific relations between urban life (and particularly neighborhood cohabitation) and mental health, highlighting more-than-human socialities. With my conceptual discussion of encounter(ing) I relate to wider debates on the entanglement of mental health and urban environments – a research question that has only recently been rediscovered in psychiatric and ethnographic work (Manning 2019; Amin & Richaud 2020; Winz & Söderström 2020). Most researchers in both domains argue for the necessity of inter- and transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production. While in psychiatry this is usually conceptualized as an integrative interdisciplinary mode aiming for generalizable findings (e.g. Lederbogen et al. 2013), ethnographers argue for the necessity of ontological problematization of the relationships between mental health and the urban in co-laborative endeavors, in order to thicken research designs (Fitzgerald et al. 2016; Söderström 2019; Rose et al. 2021).

Through my engagement with the Inclusion Project, I was able to identify, develop, and enhance encountering as an ecological concept that introduces different avenues for urban mental health research. Using encounter as an analytical heuristic, I have started to problematize the conceptual identification of neighborhood with the notion of community and tight-knit social relations in mental health care (Pols 2016) and psychiatric research. Following discussions with project partners in the field, I started to relate and translate anthropological (Faier & Rofel 2014), geographical (Wilson 2017) and sociological (Blokland 2017) debates into an ecological concept of encountering (Bieler 2021). The notion of encounter allows us not only to address the importance of weak or absent social ties (Small 2009, 2017; Felder 2020), but also to analyze the mutual co-constitution of humans and urban environments, highlighting how emergent environments are at once embodied and effected by these embodiments. Such a heuristic pays particular attention to material elements as active forces within an encounter, and through this interrogation the distinction between 'the social' and 'the biological' is transcended. Moreover, such a focus pushes for a radical reconceptualization of mental health: no longer conceptualizing it as a uniquely human and intersubjective matter, but instead problematizing the overlaps and entanglements of human and more-than-human life (Ingold 2014).

Taking part in the Inclusion Project's intervention has also revealed an important methodological lesson that should be taken into account in ethnographic and interdisciplinary research: namely, that reflections on the practical limits and obligations of mental health care practitioners have typically been neglected in studies of the relations between mental health and urban environments. Inquiring into situated interventions which deal with and target the conditions of mental health care practices, and encountering these actors as complexly

constrained epistemic partners, is a means of jointly producing analytical work that is uniquely sensitive to their working conditions. Local actors such as the staff of mental health care services and welfare organizations are knowledgeable regarding the everyday lives of people with mental health problems and the diverse features of neighborhood cohabitation. Moreover, they actively shape, design, and try to transform the relations between mental health and urban environments. Engaging with these actors and interventions creates a valuable site for situated ethnographic concept development, and is, I argue, a necessary component of situated research on the relations between mental health and urban environments.[6]

To conclude, I have argued that evolving situated concepts as part of withnessing enables contribution to a local intervention, while itself being an intervention into dominant modes of ethnographic and interdisciplinary knowledge production. It is thereby first and foremost a long-term endeavor. This shift of temporal scale allows researchers and practitioners to think beyond the narrow spatial and temporal contexts of one intervention in a single project. Surely, my participation in the local intervention of the Inclusion Project has contributed to its results and shifted its emphases, if only slightly. Whether or not any of the emergent concerns – especially those raised by my contributions – will be taken up by local actors and influence any particular course of action remains difficult if not impossible to know. However, the success or failure of my intervention does not depend on these outcomes. Rather, what is meaningful is whether the concept of encountering is able to "animate anthropological debate within as well as flourishing on its outside" (Strathern 2014: 34), "shift[ing] the axis of analysis" (ibid.: 30) of urban mental health research.

Finally, I do not wish to claim that withnessing is a primary task for ethnography, or a more adequate way of conducting it. Rather, it is a specific mode that, I argue, is a productive means of highlighting the relevance of ethnography and sharpening its critical contribution within controversial debates in the face of pressing global concerns (Latour 2004). While my approach certainly does not imply a comment on or evaluation of individual research projects or short-term research endeavors, it necessitates a reflection on the use, implementation and infrastructural conditions of long-term ethnography in teams and beyond disciplinary boundaries. It is at least doubtful that my engagement with the Inclusion Project would have been as productive without prior research by committed colleagues and a shift away from exclusively Foucauldian analytical registers. Moreover, my own contribution is not intended as a direct critique of (or attempt to impact upon) mental health care practice or research; rather, its value lies in its relation to other inquiries. How ethnographers and their inter- and transdisciplinary epistemic partners might be involved in long-term dialogue has recently been discussed and (prominently) implemented in social and cultural anthropology (Choy et al. 2009; Fortun et al. 2014). A relational anthropological take on urban mental health that co-laboratively withnesses mental health care practice and administration, I claim, is about to gain momentum and provide meaningful conceptual and methodological insights for the discipline.

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[6] These conceptual and methodological implications necessarily remain brief. For a more thorough discussion, please consider Bieler 2021.

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Wenn eine Pandemie interveniert. Überlegungen zur ethnographischen Praxis seit COVID-19

Laura K. Otto und Nicole Philipp-Jahnke

Zusammenfassung

Mit dem Beginn der COVID-19 Pandemie mussten Forscher:innen in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften weltweit ihre Forschungsvorhaben unterbrechen, neu konzeptionieren und ihre qualitativen methodischen Vorgänge überdenken. COVID-19 und die damit einhergehenden Maßnahmen intervenieren in lang etablierte und für ‚normal' empfundene Praktiken der Feldforschung. Die Frage (von) wo und mit wem Forschung möglich ist, erfährt neue Dringlichkeit und Reflexion. Für Feldforscher:innen bedeutet diese Intervention, neue Feldzugänge und Wege der Materialerhebung finden zu müssen. Dieser Beitrag analysiert sowohl qualitative, leitfadengestützte Interviews mit Ethnograph:innen als auch Blogbeiträge, um Forschungsherausforderungen und -praktiken, die unter den Bedingungen der COVID-19-Pandemie entstehen, zu diskutieren. Im Fokus steht die Analyse impliziter Annahmen und etablierter Gütekriterien ethnographischer Forschung, die durch die aktuelle Intervention sicht- und diskutierbar werden. Wir reflektieren diese Erkenntnisse und ihre Bedeutung für das Forschen in pandemischen Zeiten und darüber hinaus.

Schlagwörter: Ethnographie, Pandemie, Feldforschung, COVID-19, Methoden, Intervention

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Interventionen und Ethnographie in pandemischen Zeiten

Das Dasein und Teilnehmen im Feld sind zentrale Gütekriterien ethnographischer Feldforschung und ihre „Signatur" (Krings 2013; Stocking 1984). Ethnograph:innen bringen in der Regel die Bereitschaft mit, sich mit dem eigenen Leib auf die lokale, soziale Welt, die sie untersuchen, einzulassen (Wu 2021: 106). Die Feldforschung vor Ort und in persona hält sich hartnäckig als Erwartung und die persönliche Felderfahrung gilt als konstitutiv. Erklärtes Ziel und Mehrwert ethnographischer Forschung ist es, Informationen aus erster Hand zu gewinnen und über die Reflexion der eigenen Felderfahrung Schlüsse ziehen zu können (Breidenstein et al. 2015).

Seit dem Beginn der Corona-Pandemie finden sich Ethnograph:innen in einer Situation wieder, in der es (fast) unmöglich ist, diese Gütekriterien des Daseins und Teilnehmens zu erfüllen. Howlett argumentiert, dass die Pandemie Feldforscher:innen „back into the armchair" (Howlett 2021: 12) gedrängt habe. Es ist schwer, sich die gängigste Form der Feldforschung in Zeiten der Corona-Pandemie vorzustellen, wenn „deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998) weitgehend verboten und als verantwortungslos deklariert wird (Croteau 2020) und wenn Forscher:innen aufgrund geschlossener Grenzen ‚ihr' Feld nicht mehr besuchen können. Die aktuelle Situation wirft die Frage auf, wie (gut) Ethnograph:innen „other's lived realities from afar" (Käihkö 2021: o. A.) verstehen können. Die COVID-19-Pandemie hat einige Forscher:innen dazu veranlasst, ihre Projekte gar nicht erst anzutreten oder abzubrechen. Andere haben, um weiter forschen zu können, von technologiebasierten Zugängen Gebrauch gemacht. Diese haben es ermöglicht, dass Forschende weiter mit Personen ‚im Feld' kooperieren und forschen können, selbst wenn sie sich nicht in physischer Ko-Präsenz befinden. Diese Zugänge gelten jedoch häufig als „second choice" gegenüber dem „gold standard" der Anwesenheit im Feld (Deakin & Wakefield 2014: 604) und werden als „imperfect alternatives" (Fine & Abramson 2020: 166) beschrieben. Forscher:innen beschäftigen sich im Kontext von Ethnographie in und zu virtuellen Welten schon länger mit der Legitimation einer Feldforschung ohne physische Ko-Präsenz (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Materialerhebung, Wissensproduktion sowie ein (abermals) erweiterter Feldbegriff kennzeichnen aktuelle Fachdebatten und das „not being there" (Hannerz 2003: 202) wirft methodologische, methodische und epistemologische Fragen auf. Die einfach klingende, aber im Kern hochkomplexe Frage, wie in pandemischen Zeiten ethnographisch geforscht werden kann, müssen sich Forscher:innen in diversen Kontexten stellen.

Erste Tendenzen zeichnen sich ab und vielfältige Formen der online Forschungen werden sichtbar (Lupton 2020). Interviews finden mittels digitaler Tools statt, Forschungspartner:innen[1] schicken WhatsApp-Nachrichten oder skypen mit den Forscher:innen (Vokes & Atukunda 2020) und Dokumentenanalyse gewinnt an Bedeutung. Diverse aktuelle Forschungssituationen können als „synthetische Situationen" (Knorr Cetina 2012: 81) bezeichnet werden; sprich Situationen, in denen aus Face-to-Face-Beziehungen Face-to-Screen-Beziehungen werden. Dass Forscher:innen und Forschungspartner:innen kreative Wege finden, miteinander zu kommunizieren und das ethnographische Methodenset entsprechend modifiziert und angepasst wird, ist wenig überraschend: Vokes und Atukunda (2020: 74) weisen darauf hin, dass Feldforschung schon immer auf Kontingenz und Veränderung reagiert hat. Hammersley (2006: 3) betont: „[E]thnography does not form part of a clear and systematic taxonomy" und Pasteur de Faria (2020: o. A.) schreibt: „The ethnographic method creates an open framework capable of adapting effectively to fast-changing empirical contexts". Die Pandemie-Situation und die komplexen Fragestellungen, die sich aus ihr ergeben, führen dazu, dass sich (spontan) neue Forschungsverbünde, Netzwerke und *Research Teams* bilden, wie Streinzer et al. in dieser Ausgabe diskutieren.

Das Improvisieren und das Spontan-Sein sind keine neuen Praktiken der Feldforschung. Aktuell besteht jedoch die Notwendigkeit, Forschungsdesigns radikal zu überdenken und neu aufzusetzen (Lems 2020). Die Frage nach dem *Wie* ethnographischer Forschung in pandemischen Zeiten wird Ethnograph:innen noch eine Weile begleiten, denn „[e]ven when a

[1] Als Forschungspartner:innen werden in diesem Text Forschungsteilnehmende bezeichnet. Als Feldassistent:innen bezeichnen wir im weiteren Verlauf hingegen Personen, die konkrete Aufgaben der Materialerhebung übernommen haben, ggf. gegen eine Entlohnung.

‚new normal' is established, many of our previously used approaches to research will likely need to be re-thought and altered" (Howlett 2021: 2). Im Kontext dieses Bandes der *Kulturanthropologie Notizen* gehen wir davon aus, dass die Pandemie und die mit ihr im Zusammenhang stehenden (gesundheits-)politischen Maßnahmen in etablierte Forschungsbeziehungen und -modi interveniert. Die Pandemie denken wir entsprechend als neuen, nicht-menschlichen Akteur. Wie in der Einleitung zu diesem Band diskutiert, sind Interventionen nicht zwingend intentional, nicht linear und eine mehr-als-menschliche Praktik. Die Interventionen durch COVID-19 legen etablierte Normen und Formen der Feldforschung – um mit Sánchez Criádo und Estalella (2018) zu denken – offen und stellen sie in Frage. Dies regt die Reflexion des ethnographischen Methodensets an und evoziert neue (experimentelle) Forschungspraktiken, die in diesem Beitrag betrachtet werden. Wir fokussieren Interviews im virtuellen Raum, die Zusammenarbeit mit Feldassistent:innen, das technikbasierte Weiter-Forschen, sowie Fragen nach neuen Selbst- und Fremdpositionierungen von Forscher:innen, die eng mit Kooperations(un)möglichkeiten[2] in und mit dem Feld verwoben sind.

Entstehung und Rahmung des Beitrags

Basis für unsere Ausführungen sind primär online durchgeführte, leitfadengestützte Interviews[3] mit Ethnograph:innen, deren Forschung durch die globale Ausbreitung von COVID-19 unterbrochen wurde. Die Wissenschaftler:innen, die für diesen Artikel interviewt wurden, decken mit ihren Forschungen eine Bandbreite an verschiedenen Themen ab: Sie reichen von Studien im Feld der Biotechnologie und Biomedizin (Franziska Grieb) über Umgangspraktiken mit invasiven Algen (Laura Otto), von Forschung zu transgenerationalem Erinnern in diasporischen Gemeinden (Emma Hansen) bis zu Praktiken des ‚future making' (Anna Lisa Ramella) sowie zu künstlerischer Aufarbeitung von Menschenrechtsverletzungen (Valentina Priess). Lokalisiert sind einige der Projekte in Europa, andere in außereuropäischen Staaten. Das Sample der befragten Forscher:innen hat sich organisch entwickelt und bereits interviewte Forscher:innen haben den Kontakt zu weiteren potentiellen Gesprächspartner:innen hergestellt. Zudem wurden Blogbeiträge (primär veröffentlicht auf dem Boas Blog „Fieldwork meets Crisis") in den Materialkorpus eingebunden. Das hat es ermöglicht, weitere Stimmen und Erfahrungen, die (bereits) im digitalen Raum veröffentlicht wurden, zu berücksichtigen. Im Forschungsprozess haben sich Materialsammlung und -auswertung abgewechselt; das Material wurde iterativ ergänzt und analysiert.

Laura Otto, eine der beiden Autorinnen dieses Beitrags, war zunächst eine der Interviewten: Zum Beginn der Pandemie im Februar und März 2020 befand sie sich für ihre Feldforschung in Mexiko; ihre Forschung zu Sargasso-Algen entlang der Karibikküste war unmittelbar von COVID-19 und den damit einhergehenden (gesundheits-)politischen Maßnahmen

[2] Hauer, Faust und Binder (2021) verstehen das „Kooperieren" als einen spezifischen Modus ethnographischer Praxis – neben Kollaborieren und Kuratieren.

[3] In diesem Beitrag wird ein Teil des Materials, welches Nicole Philipp-Jahnke im Sommer und Herbst 2020 für eine Forschung an der Goethe-Universität im Fachbereich Soziologie erhoben hat, verwendet. In ihrem Forschungsprojekt geht es ebenfalls um Praktiken von Forscher:innen in der Pandemie. Alle Interviewten haben ihr Einverständnis zur Verwendung des Interviewmaterials gegeben. Einige haben ein Pseudonym (Franziska Grieb, Emma Hansen und Valentina Priess) gewählt, andere (Laura Otto und Anna Lisa Ramella) möchten mit ihrem Namen zitiert werden.

betroffen. Laura Otto hatte, wie alle anderen Interviewpartner:innen, ihre Forschung ursprünglich basierend auf mehrmonatiger teilnehmender Beobachtung geplant. Im Rahmen des weiteren Austauschs über das Forschen während der Pandemie zwischen den beiden Autorinnen entstand die Idee für diesen Artikel. Die Auswertung weiterführenden Materials fand gemeinsam statt und Laura Otto hat eine Doppelrolle: Auf der einen Seite ist sie Interviewte und wird zitiert, auf der anderen Seite ist sie Deutende und Schreibende. Die Ko-Autorinnenschaft, wie wir sie praktizierten, ermöglicht eine Lese- und Deutungserfahrung, die die Person, die das Material erhoben hat, einerseits produktiv herausfordert und andererseits kollegial unterstützt (Otto & Kaufmann 2018). Auf diese Weise war es für Laura Otto eine Möglichkeit, weitere Ebenen des eigenen Materials erkenn- und analysierbar zu machen und öffnete die Möglichkeit zur auto-ethnografischen Reflexion der Geschehnisse zu Beginn von COVID-19 in Mexiko (Otto 2021) – eine weitere Methode, die neben digital geführten Interviews, Dokumentenanalyse sowie der Zusammenarbeit mit Feldforschungsassistent:innen im Kontext der Pandemie an Bedeutung gewonnen hat.

Not Being There… and There… and There

Im Zuge der Etablierung des persönlich ‚Im-Feld-Seins' als „the only fully […] acknowledged model for fieldwork" (Hannerz 2003: 202) haben sich normative Vorstellungen darüber, was und wie Feldforschung sein sollte, etabliert: Mobilität der Forscher:innen, Miteinander von Forscher:in und Forschungspartner:innen im Feld sowie Teilnehmen vor Ort werden als selbstverständlich angesehen. Die konkrete Ausgestaltung dieser Ansprüche hat sich bereits im Kontext von Globalisierungsprozessen und durch Forschungsgegenstände, die mehrortig sind, dynamisiert. Forschungspraktische und konzeptionelle Antworten lassen sich bei George E. Marcus (1998) *multi-sited ethnographies* ebenso finden wie bei Arjun Appadurais (1996) Überlegungen zu *scapes*. Forscher:innen wurden entsprechend ihrer Gegenstände hyper-mobil und die Forschungsstrategien des „tracing and tracking" (Marcus 1995: 108) erlauben es, Felder transnational aufzuspannen. Das Feld wird in aktuelleren Debatten als konstruiert und prozessual verstanden (Marcus 1986; Candea 2007; Welz 2009; Hess & Schwertl 2013).

Digitale Technologien und die daraus entstehenden Möglichkeiten der ethnographischen Materialerhebung haben diese Entwicklungen schon vor der Corona-Pandemie weiter intensiviert. Sie haben es möglich gemacht, dass Forscher:innen von Zuhause ‚ihr Feld' aufspannen und mit ihren Forschungspartner:innen in Kontakt bleiben können. Um nicht weiter eine dichotome und oft nicht haltbare Trennung von ‚Zuhause' und ‚Feld' zu reproduzieren, wird das Feld zunehmend als Netzwerk bestehend aus „physical, virtual, and imagined spaces" (Burrell 2009: 181) verstanden. Fragen nach hier und/oder dort werden permanent neu verhandelt (Gupta 2014; Ahlin & Li 2019).

Die Frage der „placeness" (Haverinen 2015: 86), also *wo* und *von wo* Forschung stattfinden kann, stellt sich aktuell unter neuen Bedingungen. Die Verlagerung der Materialerhebung und -sammlung in den digitalen Raum stellte für viele Forscher:innen den einzigen Weg dar, trotz *Lockdowns*, Grenzschließungen und *Social Distancing*-Maßnahmen ihre Forschung weiter zu verfolgen. Die online-basierte Forschung ist kein neues Terrain für die Ethnographie. Es gibt Beispiele von ‚Onlineethnographie', ‚digital and virtual ethnographies', oder ‚Chatnographien', die sowohl Online-Material sowie *Social Media*-Plattformen inkludieren und das Internet als Tool, Ressource und Feld verstehen (Janowitz 2009).

Und es hat Zoom gemacht: Interviews im virtuellen Raum zwischen Skepsis und Chance

Für ethnographische Interviews treffen sich Forschende und ihre Gesprächspartner:innen in der Regel persönlich. Während der Corona-Pandemie ist das physische Beisammensein in weiten Teilen jedoch unmöglich geworden. Stattdessen nutzen Forschende und ihre Forschungspartner:innen vermehrt digitale Tools zur Kommunikation, wie beispielsweise Zoom, Skype, BigBlueButton oder Webex. Aus physischer Nähe wurde eine virtuelle Ko-Präsenz.

Die meisten Ethnograph:innen, die an der Forschung von Nicole Philipp-Jahnke teilnahmen, standen den digital vermittelten Interviews zum Zeitpunkt der Gespräche im Sommer 2020 skeptisch gegenüber – sie hatten das physisch ko-präsente Interview für normal empfunden. Vor allem waren sie in Sorge, dass sie wichtige non-verbale Äußerungen übersehen und keine Vorstellung mehr von der Umgebung der interviewten Person bekommen können: „Ich könnte über Zoom sicher weitermachen. Aber das ist eine andere Atmosphäre, eine andere Situation", reflektierte Emma Hansen (Interview, 16.07.2020). Als ‚normal' wurde verstanden, dass Forschende bei ihren Forschungsteilnehmenden anwesend sind und sich ein persönliches Bild von Umgebung und Atmosphäre machen können. Als fehlend wurde der ‚informelle' Charakter von Interviewgesprächen beschrieben, wenn sie online durchgeführt werden. Damit meinte Emma Hansen Informationen, die außerhalb einer offiziellen Interviewsituation auftauchen und denen eine wichtige Rolle im Rahmen ethnographischer Interviews beigemessen wird: „Ich habe die Erfahrung gemacht, dass, wenn ich ein Interview führe mit persönlichem Kontakt, dann kamen meistens die spannendsten Gespräche, wenn ich das Aufnahmegerät ausgeschaltet habe. Und ich glaube dieser Part fällt weg bei Zoom", befürchtete Emma Hansen (Interview, 16.07.2020).

Die für diesen Beitrag interviewten Forscher:innen teilten zudem die Sorge, dass digital vermittelte Interviews in Zukunft das physisch ko-präsente Interview ersetzen könnten: „Ist auch vielleicht unkomplizierter, man muss sich dann halt nicht treffen. Menschen werden viel mehr den Impuls haben, virtuelle oder digitale, digital vermittelte synthetische Interviews zu führen", lautete die Einschätzung von Franziska Grieb (Interview, 27.07.2020). Diese Befürchtung, dass Zoom-Interviews die neue Normalität werden, führte dazu, dass sie Einladungen seitens der Forschungspartner:innen zu digitalen Interviews skeptisch gegenüberstand und diese ablehnte: „Mir haben dann die Leute aus dem Feld Zoom-Interviews vorgeschlagen. […] Aber ich würde lieber in persona die Gespräche führen, wenn es wieder geht. […] Nicht, dass es heißt ‚Naja, Sie haben ja jetzt schon alles gehört, das müssen wir jetzt nicht mehr nachholen.' […] Ich will mich nicht auf diese Kompromisslösung einlassen" (Franziska Grieb, Interview, 27.07.2020). Im Gespräch mit Franziska Grieb wurde – ebenso wie in anderen Interviews – deutlich, dass sie das Interview als Bestandteil des ethnographischen Methodensets verstand und es als ein fortgeführtes Gespräch, welches bereits informell mit Forschungspartner:innen vor Ort begann, ansah. Das Interview wurde nicht als eine Methode verstanden, mit der einfach ‚nur' empirisches Material generiert werden kann – wie es z. B. im Journalismus üblicher wäre – sondern als Teil einer gewachsenen Forschungsbeziehung. Interviews und andere Forschungsgespräche werden aktuell vermehrt zu Einzel-Events, die von alltäglichen Situationen losgelöst scheinen, statt dass sie, wie in der ‚konventionellen' Feldforschung, Teil eines längeren, sozialen Prozesses sind. Anstelle von „Begegnungen" seien, laut Jo Reichertz (2021: 314), digital ko-präsente Situationen nur „Treffen".

Ein Effekt der Intervention durch die Pandemie ist diese neue Rahmung von Forschungsbeziehungen als Events der Materialerhebung statt als soziales Kontinuum – digitale Tools formieren und verändern die Forschung, wie sie vielfach praktiziert und für ‚normal' empfunden wurde.

Neben diesen Befürchtungen gibt es ebenso positive Stimmen zu und Erfahrungen mit den online vermittelten Interviews. Die Ethnographin Marnie Howlett (2021) betont, dass diese Verschiebung von einer „offline co-location" zu einer „online co-presence" (in Anlehnung an Beaulieu 2010) weniger invasiv im Kontrast zum plötzlichen Auftauchen in physisch ko-präsenter Feldforschung sei. Ihre Forschungspartner:innen, schreibt Howlett (2021), hätten mehr Entscheidungsmacht in Bezug auf die Frage, ob der Ethnographin der Feldzugang gewährt oder verwehrt wird. Diese Dynamik nahm sie positiv wahr, da sie sich als weniger aufdringlich empfand: „My access to Ukraine during the pandemic was determined entirely by my participants' willingness to invite me into their ‚worlds'" (ebd.: 6). Forscher:innen nahmen zudem die Interviews im virtuellen Raum oft als angenehmer und hierarchiefreier wahr: „Durch Skype hatte ich schon das Gefühl, dass das Interview [...] deutlich mehr auf Augenhöhe stattgefunden hat. Denn jeweils beide saßen da in ihrem privaten Zuhause, die eine im Wohnzimmer, die andere in der Küche und waren auch ganz leger gekleidet", reflektierte Valentina Priess (Interview, 27.07.2020). Dieses Setting habe das Interview insgesamt „sympathischer gemacht", betonte sie weiter (Interview, 27.07.2020). Die digital vermittelten Interviews seien zudem im Schnitt länger (Howlett 2021: 7) als die Gespräche, die in physischer Ko-Präsenz durchgeführt wurden.

Dass Forschende bei Forschungsteilnehmenden vor Ort sind und einen (professionell forschenden) Einblick in deren (privates) Umfeld erlangen können, aber eben nicht automatisch *vice versa,* ist eine der Annahmen, die die Intervention durch COVID-19 in die ethnographische Praxis sichtbar macht. Während in ‚konventionelleren' Feldforschungen Forschende primär ausschließlich in den Alltag und den Raum der Forschungspartner:innen eingedrungen sind, herrscht hier nun mehr Gegenseitigkeit. Aktuell bekommen Interviewpartner:innen im Rahmen digitaler Interviews durch die Bildschirme einen Einblick in den Alltag und die Lebens- und Wohnsituation der Forschenden. In den synthetischen Situationen geben Forschende mehr von sich und ihrem Umfeld preis, was die Annahmen von ‚professionell' (Forscher:in) vs. ‚privat' (Forschungspartner:in) irritiert. Schließlich ist es nicht so, dass für die Forschungspartner:innen alles ‚normal' blieb, während Forschende digitale Lösungen finden müssen. Vor diesem Hintergrund werden die oft als dichotom verstandenen Begriffe von professionell und privat nicht nur in der Forschungsbeziehung, sondern auch in anderen Kontexten dynamisiert: Schließlich sind die Alltage von Forschungspartner:innen ebenso stark verändert wie die von Forschenden.

Die Intervention durch COVID-19 hat verdeutlicht, welche Formen des Interviewführens in ethnographischer Feldforschung für ‚normal' und angemessen gehalten wurden. Vor Corona wurden Interviews oft als Ergebnis gewachsener Forschungsbeziehungen verstanden und sie entstanden regelmäßig ungeplant und spontan. Daraus wurden nun vermehrt geplante Situationen, die mit einer klaren zeitlichen Grenze assoziiert werden und die Materialerhebung vermehrt zum Event machen. Das ist für bestimmte Felder und Forschungsgegenstände von Vorteil, denn es gibt Akteur:innen, die mittels digitaler Kommunikation gut erreicht werden können und sich somit die Chance ergibt, mit ihnen forschen zu können. Gleichzeitig exkludiert das digitale Forschen Akteur:innen, die keinen Zugang zum Internet haben oder aus anderen Gründen nicht an digitaler Forschung partizipieren können oder

wollen. Die Reflexion über Machtverhältnisse sowie In- und Exklusionspraktiken gewinnt durch die Intervention von COVID-19 erneute Dringlichkeit.

Diese beschriebenen Dynamiken verweisen auf das Potenzial, Forschungsbeziehung und -prozess verstärkt beidseitig zu verhandeln, sodass Forschende als weniger invasiv wahrgenommen werden (Pasteur de Faria 2020). Die unterschiedlichen Einschätzungen der Veränderung der Gesprächssituation durch digitale Tools legen offen, unter welchen Vorannahmen Feldforscher:innen in offline-Forschungen ihr methodisches Vorgehen legitimierten und welche Grundbedingungen für ‚gutes Forschen' implizit vorausgesetzt werden. Seit COVID-19 in die für bisher als ‚normal' geltende Forschungspraxis interveniert, sind Ethnograph:innen wieder verstärkt dazu angehalten, ihre Wissensproduktion ebenso wie ihr Methodenset kritisch zu reflektieren. Dies gilt unabhängig von einem pandemischen Kontext, denn es gibt immer Akteur:innen, die aus verschiedenen Gründen nicht interviewt werden (können). Vor dem Hintergrund der online-basierten Forschung spitzt sich die Frage nach einer Teilnahme an Interviews zu. Personen, die keinen Zugang zum Internet haben oder über ihre Themen online nicht sprechen können, werden ausgeschlossen. Es sind vor allem sensible Themen, wie zum Beispiel Illegalität, Erkrankung oder ähnliches, die online eher nicht besprochen werden können (Howlett 2021) und Personen, die sich entweder nicht trauen, digital zu sprechen und zu interagieren oder es nicht können, geraten aus dem Blick. Nicht zuletzt aber haben fachinterne Auseinandersetzungen mit kolonialen Verhältnissen dazu geführt, dass sich die Fächer Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie/Empirische Kulturwissenschaft intensiv der Sichtbarmachung und Analyse von marginalisierten, vulnerabilisierten und prekarisierten Menschen und ihren Perspektiven widmen (Hauer et al. 2021). Nicht jede Forschungsfrage und jedes Forschungsdesign können mittels digital erhobener und vermittelter Materialien beantwortet und durchgeführt werden. Dies berührt explizit Fragen des Datenschutzes und den Schutz der Privatsphäre – die Bedingungen der Kooperation mit Forschenden haben sich im Zuge zunehmender Digitalisierung der ethnographischen Praxis verändert.

Kurzfristige Kooperation oder langfristige Veränderung ethnographischer Materialerhebung? Feldassistent:innen und neue Formen der Wissensproduktion

Im Rahmen aktueller Kontaktbeschränkungen, Reiseverbote und -warnungen sowie der zunehmenden Digitalisierung in sämtlichen Lebensbereichen und Weltregionen, setzen einige Forscher:innen auf die Zusammenarbeit mit Feldassistent:innen vor Ort. Diese erheben Material, welches sie den Forscher:innen zur Verfügung stellen. In einigen Fällen wird das Material gemeinsam diskutiert und veröffentlicht (Ramella & Zillinger 2020; Vokes & Atukunda 2020). Während die Zusammenarbeit mit Feldassistent:innen nicht neu ist (Gupta 2014), erhält dieser Modus der Materialerhebung im Zuge der COVID-Pandemie neue Aufmerksamkeit. Die Pandemie interveniert in die Annahme, dass es Forschende sein sollten, die Material erheben und neue Debatten um die Fragen nach ethnographischer Kompetenz und Autor:innenschaft anregen. In diesem Zuge werden Fragen nach Repräsentation, Eurozentrismus und die spätestens seit der *Writing Culture*-Debatte vieldiskutierte Frage nach dem ‚wer schreibt über wen', wieder wichtiger.

Auf dem Boas-Blog diskutieren Anna Lisa Ramella und Martin Zillinger, dass sie ihre Forschung in Kenia aufgrund der Corona-Pandemie unterbrachen und das ostafrikanische Land verlassen haben. Es ist ihnen – nicht zuletzt aufgrund ihrer Feldkontakte, die sie bereits

vor der Pandemie hatten – gelungen, Feldassistent:innen vor Ort ausfindig zu machen, mit denen sie während ihrer Abwesenheit in Kontakt bleiben konnten, die ihnen Fotos oder WhatsApp-Sprachnachrichten schickten und die sie für ihre Arbeit vor Ort entlohnen. Diese Zusammenarbeit führt dazu, dass die Stimmen der Menschen im Feld hör- und sichtbarer gemacht werden; nicht zuletzt, weil vermehrt Ko-Autor:innenschaften entstehen (Ramella & Zillinger 2020). Hierin liegt das Potenzial zur (weiteren) Öffnung akademischer Wissensproduktion, wobei – wie auch Ramella und Zillinger betonen – diese Praxis der Erhebung nicht genutzt werden sollte, um Machthierarchien in Forschungsbeziehungen zu verharmlosen.

Einen ähnlichen kooperativen Ansatz nutzen Vokes und Atukunda (2020: 74) und es ist ihnen gelungen, mit ihren Forschungspartner:innen über WhatsApp und Zoom in Kontakt zu bleiben:

> „In this way, each respondent was invited to keep a regular ‚field diary' of their experiences during the lockdown, focusing upon a varying set of themes and issues, and to gather supporting audio-visual materials in relation to this, which included everything from photos taken on their smartphones, to videos or memes downloaded from the Internet".

Die Forscher:innen bezeichnen diesen Weg als „deeply engaging first-hand insights" (ebd.: 75). Vokes und Atukunda reflektieren, dass diese Form des Erhebens, Besprechens und Teilens von Material den Forschungspartner:innen geholfen habe, mit der Corona-Situation einen besseren Umgang finden zu können. Während sich durch die Intervention der Pandemie Methoden der Forschungszusammenarbeit verändern und neu etablieren, gibt es ebenso Skepsis in Bezug auf die verlorenen oder zumindest stark eingeschränkten eigenen Erfahrungen im Feld, wie Laura Otto reflektierte:

> „Ich versuche einen Teil der Forschungsgelder so zu verwenden, dass ich in Mexiko mit *research assistants* arbeiten kann. Sie würden für mich Material erheben, welches ich deuten und auswerten könnte. Dann fehlt mir aber meine eigene Erfahrung und das Lernen über die eigene Erfahrung, die eigenen Irritationen, die man in der Feldforschung hat und die ja auch wichtig sind […] aber es kann vielleicht jemand weiter forschen, wenn ich nicht mehr hinkann" (Interview, 01.07.2020).

Das Kontakt-Halten mit Akteur:innen, die Forscher:innen aus der Feldforschung kennen, kann schwierig sein, wenn keine Forschungsassistent:innen zwischengeschaltet werden (können) und Forschungspartner:innen nicht online erreichbar sind, wie Laura Ottos Erfahrung aus Mexiko zeigt:

> „Mein Forschungsvorhaben ist in eine reine online basierte Forschung schwierig zu übersetzen. Die Menschen, die den Strand putzen und die Algen wegschaffen, also die *beach clean-up teams*, sie werden oft schlecht bezahlt und hatten oft geringe Chancen, an Bildung teilzunehmen. Sie haben häufig keine Technik, auf die sie zurückgreifen könnten. Man muss sie direkt am Strand ansprechen, miteinander reden, zusammen den Strand reinigen, zusammen im Schatten Pause machen. Wenn man nicht bei ihnen ist, kann man nicht mit ihnen sein" (Interview, 01.07.2020).

Es war während der Pandemie einfacher mit anderen Wissenschaftler:innen, die vor Ort zum selben Gegenstand forschen, in Kontakt zu bleiben:

> „Eine Meeresbiologin der UNAM[4] antwortet mir immer zügig, sie gibt mir Einblicke in die Situation am Meer, ihr Büro ist schließlich gleich dort und sie lebt nah am Strand. Sprich: Sie trifft täglich auf die Algen und kann mir darüber berichten. Aber hier ist natürlich die Gefahr, dass die Forschung dann eher zu einer Forschung wird, die bestimmte Praktiken und Perspektiven übersieht und ausblendet. Es ist dann eben ein anderer Akteur:innenfokus“ (Interview, 01.07.2020).

Die Aussage von Laura Otto verweist auf die implizite Annahme, dass die subjektive Erfahrung von Forschenden im Feld für die ethnographische Wissensproduktion zentral ist. Während geschätzt wird, dass Kolleg:innen vor Ort weiter für Gespräche bereitstehen und der Kontakt nicht abreißt, bleibt das Beobachten der Praktiken der Forschungspartner:innen nahezu unmöglich. Die Beschreibung und Analyse von scheinbar banalen Alltagspraktiken ist für den:die Forscher:in maßgeblich – für den:die Forschungspartner:innen hingegen schwer artikulierbar. Sie erachten ihre Routinen oftmals als wenig relevant. Die Selbstverständlichkeiten und das implizite Wissen der Forschungspartner:innen kann, so wird es im Gespräch mit Laura Otto deutlich, digital weniger gut kontextualisiert und nur schwer mit anderen Perspektiven kontrastiert werden. Laura Otto berichtete im Interview weiter:

> „Ein konkreter Mehrwert unserer Methoden ist ja das Narrative, das Stimmungsgeladene. Wie hat es gerochen vor Ort, nach was hat die Luft geschmeckt, was kann man hören? Wäre ich selbst nie in Mexiko gewesen, dann wüsste ich gar nicht, wie ekelhaft die verrotteten Algen riechen, wie faule Eier, in einem unglaublichen Ausmaß, das zieht bis in die Dörfer. […] Da frage ich mich: Wie soll ich das jetzt digital übersetzen? Wie wird sich Ethnographie verändern? Da kann man bestimmt neue Sachen herausfinden, aber im Moment frage ich mich eher, was wir auch verlieren“ (Interview, 01.07.2020).

In diesen Überlegungen und methodischen Experimenten deutet sich an, dass die Intervention in den ethnographischen Forschungsprozess längerfristige Veränderungen in der Wissensgenerierung erzeugt. Die aktuelle Situation scheint mehr Offenheit in Bezug auf kollaborative und kooperative Forschungs- und Schreibprozesse zu generieren. Hierhin liegt das Potenzial, Hierarchien in Forschungsbeziehungen zu reflektieren, zu adressieren und in Teilen zu überwinden. Dass Forscher:innen aktuell erfolgreich sind, digital mit anderen Akteur:innen zu kooperieren, liegt sicherlich auch daran, dass die Corona-Pandemie in sämtliche Alltagspraktiken interveniert hat und im Eiltempo jegliche Kontakte ‚digitalisiert‘ wurden. Ob diese Euphorie für die digitale Kommunikation anhält und Forschungspartner:innen und -assistent:innen auch in Zukunft bereit sind, auf diesen Wegen ausgiebig weiter für Forschung zu kooperieren und sich synthetische Situationen etablieren, wird die Praxis zeigen. Gleichzeitig deutet sich an, dass digital erhobenes Material sich von Material, das in physischer Ko-Präsenz gesammelt wurde, unterscheidet: In den Interviews steht primär das Gesprochene im Zentrum und das Beobachtbare fällt (eher) weg. Durch die zunehmende Digitalisierung werden auch Ausschlüsse produziert: Wer keinen Zugang zur notwendigen Infrastruktur hat, um digital zu kommunizieren, kann weder als Feldforschungsassistent:in noch als Forschungspartner:in fungieren (Deakin & Wakefield 2014; Lobe et al. 2020).

[4] National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Forschende zwischen Virusübertragung, Feldgefahr und eigenen Ängsten

Die Frage, wer für Feldforschung überhaupt (noch) erreichbar ist, stellt sich nicht nur entlang der Trennung ‚Zugang' oder ‚kein Zugang' zu Internet und Technik. Forschungsethische Fragen spielen eine zentrale Rolle in den Überlegungen der Forscher:innen: Wer ist überhaupt noch ansprechbar für Forschung in Zeiten großer finanzieller Unsicherheit und gesundheitlichen Ängsten in weiten Teilen der Welt? Mit wem können Ethnograph:innen noch in den Kontakt treten und um Zusammenarbeit bitten?

Vor dem Hintergrund, dass in pandemischen Zeiten jede:r als potenzielle:r Virusüberträger:in gedeutet werden kann und weltweit Kontakte zu anderen Personen stark eingeschränkt wurden, ist es schwieriger geworden als Ethnograph:in Zugang zum Feld zu bekommen, wie Franziska Grieb reflektierte:

> „Ich kann immer noch nicht wieder an meinen Feldforschungsort. Weil es dann auch noch nach 20 Mails oder so hieß, die Kolleg:innen haben doch Angst, weil da einige auch in der Risikogruppe sind. Die haben Angst, wenn da noch eine Externe die ganze Zeit rumläuft" (Interview, 27.07.2020).

Diejenigen, die während der Corona-Pandemie doch physisch ko-präsent forschen konnten, wurden immer wieder als Gefährdung gelesen und entsprechend markiert, wie Franziska Grieb weiter berichtete:

> „Ich komme als Externe rein und das wird auch so performiert. Da wird einem dann gezeigt, wie sicherheitsbewusst alle sind. Mir wurde gesagt ‚Bitte wasch' deine Hände auf der Toilette'. […] Und das macht natürlich etwas mit der Dynamik, weil das so ein klares Markieren von ‚Du bist extern und außenstehend' ist und das passiert gleich an der Eingangstür. Und eine leitende Person meinte dann noch zu mir ‚Also, wenn uns das jetzt passieren würde, wenn hier ein Corona-Fall wäre, dann wäre das eine Totalkatastrophe'. […] Das macht natürlich was mit einem selbst, wenn man denkt, man hat jetzt die Verantwortung, da bloß nichts einzuschleppen" (Interview, 27.07.2020).

Die wahrgenommene Verantwortung für die Forschungspartner:innen und -assistent:innen spielt in den ethnologischen Wissenschaften immer eine bedeutende Rolle, aber dass Ethnograph:innen ihre Gesprächspartner:innen mit einem Virus anstecken könnten, ist für die meisten ein neues Thema. Verantwortungsvoll zu handeln und den Regeln des *Social Distancing* Folge zu leisten, bedeutete für Anna Lisa Ramella, dass sie zwei wichtige Gesprächspartner:innen in Kenia nicht mehr besuchte:

> „Wir hatten vor, in zwei entlegene Dörfer zu fahren und dort zwei Fischer, die die ersten Luos waren, die nach Baringo migriert sind in den 1940er Jahren und die beide über 90 Jahre alt sind. Sie wollten wir dort treffen und interviewen […]. […] es fühlte sich aber dann für uns nicht mehr richtig an in ein entlegenes Dorf zu fahren und dort alte Menschen zu treffen" (Interview, 17.07.2020).

Zahlreiche Forschungspartner:innen und -assistent:innen bangen außerdem um ihre existenzielle Lage. Die „soziale, ökonomische, humanitäre und emotionale Situation" (Rattunde 2020: o. A.) muss in Zeiten der Corona-Krise besonders intensiv von Forschenden mitgedacht und berücksichtigt werden. Naomi Rattunde, die in Ecuador forscht, betont in ihrem

Blogbeitrag, dass die aktuelle Corona-Situation gerade Mitglieder der indigenen Bevölkerung im kollektiven Gedächtnis schmerzlich an andere Epidemien erinnere, die nach ihrer (gewaltvollen) ‚Kontaktierung' Mitte des letzten Jahrhunderts ausbrachen (ebd.). Gerade diese Personen derzeit nach Kooperation und Zusammenarbeit für die eigene Forschung zu fragen, scheint verantwortungslos.

In den angebotenen Reflexionen zeigen sich spezifisch westlich situierte Bewertungen von Krisenhaftigkeit, Vulnerabilität und Prekarität, die nun scheinbar für alle gelten. Die Corona-Pandemie zeigt, dass diese weltweite Krise offenbar ein neues ‚wir' schafft: Jede:r könnte erkranken, jede:r könnte das Virus potenziell übertragen. Während diese Dynamiken aktuell unter Selbstschutz und Verantwortung für andere diskutiert werden und im Zweifel Feldforschung unmöglich machen, gelten andere Umwelt-, Finanz- oder Regierungskrisen primär als interessanter Forschungsgegenstand und betreffen die ethnographische Forschungspraxis nicht oder nur in geringem Maße. Die Bewertung dessen, was wann für wen als Krise oder Intervention wahrnehmbar wird, muss immer als situiert verstanden werden. Die Reflexion darüber, wer (nicht) an Forschung teilnehmen kann, stellt sich unabhängig von COVID-19. Ethnographische Forschung sollte sich immer fragen, ob – und wenn ja, wie – Personen, die sich in finanziell prekären oder anderweitig vulnerabilisierten Positionen befinden, in Forschung integriert werden können. Die Pandemie exponiert Ungleichheiten und Risikolagen, die *immer* relevant sind.

Quo vadis, Ethnographie?

In diesem Beitrag haben wir auf aktuelle Forschungspraktiken und Erzählungen von Ethnograph:innen zurückgegriffen, um zu diskutieren, wie die COVID-19-Pandemie in ihre Forschungspraxis interveniert und welche Effekte dies für Forschungsmethodik und die Zusammenarbeit mit Forschungspartner:innen und -assistent:innen hat. Die Pandemie kann als Brennglas verstanden werden, durch das vormals als selbstverständlich angenommene oder explizit ausgeblendete Bedingungen und Konsequenzen der Forschungszusammenarbeit unübersehbar werden. Die Intervention durch COVID-19 in die epistemische und methodische Praxis der Feldforschung zeigt, dass altbekannte Fragen neue Dringlichkeit erfahren und sich neue Spannungsfelder auftun. Die Corona-Pandemie und ihre Effekte befremden und verändern die ethnographische Wissensproduktion. Aktuell wird wieder intensiv über den Kern ethnographischer Methoden und die eigene epistemische Praxis nachgedacht; vor allem vor dem Hintergrund, dass momentan nicht nur Forschung, sondern soziale Praxis in diversen Kontexten stark verändert wird. Es ergibt sich ein Spannungsfeld, in dem sich auch die Ethnographie befindet: Auf der einen Seite werden Ungleichheiten verstärkt oder entstehen neu, und gleichzeitig werden inklusivere Formen des Austausches möglich.

Die in diesem Beitrag zitierten Ethnograph:innen äußerten die Sorge über den möglichen Verlust von Spontanität und das Wegbrechen zufälliger Begegnungen im Feld, die im Kontext von Feldforschung normalisiert und als zentral verstanden werden. Es scheint komplizierter geworden zu sein, relevante Forschungspartner:innen zu identifizieren und sie für die eigene Forschung begeistern zu können, wenn man sich nicht beiläufig begegnet und miteinander ins Gespräch kommen kann. Für verschiedene Formen qualitativer Forschung gilt – und für die Ethnographie im Besonderen – dass das Vertrauen der Partner:innen gewonnen werden muss, um sie von einer Zusammenarbeit zu überzeugen und Forschenden Zugang zu gewähren. Hier lautete die Annahme, dass Forscher:innen durch ihr „being there" Vertrauen gewinnen können.

Diskutiert haben wir, wie Ethnograph:innen – trotz eines „not being there“ – Wege gefunden haben, mit ihren Gesprächspartner:innen in Kontakt zu treten, zu bleiben und digital oder mittels Feldassistent:innen weiter zu forschen. Wir konnten für diesen Beitrag unkompliziert auf Blogs zurückgreifen, die sich zeitnah mit den Auswirkungen der Pandemie auf die ethnographische Forschungspraxis auseinandersetzen. Die von Nicole Philipp-Jahnke interviewten Forscher:innen stellten sich für Gespräche über ihre Forschung in pandemischen Zeiten zur Verfügung. Ohne die Technik und die damit verbundenen Tools wären die Face-to-Screen-Beziehungen, um noch einmal auf Knorr Cetina (2012) zurückzukommen, so nicht möglich gewesen. Dies verändert die Bedingungen und die Möglichkeiten des Austausches bereits während der Erhebungsphase, die in der Regel von einem:einer einzelnen Forscher:in vor Ort durchgeführt wurde. Feldforschung im Team oder in einem kollaborativen Modus durchzuführen, stellte einen gangbaren Weg dar, um seit Beginn von COVID-19 überhaupt forschen zu können und die Intervention stellt die Idee des:der Ethnograph:in als ‚Einzelkämpfer:in‘ in Frage. Zukünftig gemeinsam und im Team zu forschen und dabei von digitalen Medien Gebrauch zu machen adressiert nicht nur Fragen von ethnographischer Autorität und Hierarchien in Forschung und Wissensproduktion, sondern macht eine Forschung gegenüber unplanbaren Situationen standhafter.

Der aktuell beobachtbare experimentelle Umgang mit ethnographischer Forschung reiht sich in die Tradition ein, dass die Feldforschung kein festes, statisches Phänomen oder fixes Methodenset darstellt (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018). Feldforschung ist schon immer durch besondere Konfigurationen menschlicher und mehr-als-menschlicher Beziehungen und Relationen gekennzeichnet, die sich über Raum und Zeit hinweg verändern. Die COVID-19 Pandemie stellt einen weiteren Disruptionsmoment für die Ethnographie dar und stößt einen Reflexionsprozess über die „norm and form“ (Sánchez Criado & Estalella 2018: 1) der Forschungspraxis an. Die in situ Forschung, das Kooperieren mit Akteur:innen vor Ort, das Miteinander- und Beieinander nah sein, ist in den Fächern Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie/Empirische Kulturwissenschaft nicht nur zur Norm und Normalität geworden, sondern diese Modi sind lange erprobt, vielfach kritisiert, reflektiert und modifiziert worden. Die aktuelle Situation erlaubt es, hier anzusetzen und die digitalen Methoden der Ethnographie weiter auszuprobieren und sie entsprechend zu reflektieren und anzupassen. Dieser Prozess der aktuellen „disorderings“ (Vokes & Atukunda 2020: 77) zeigt eine – wenn nicht die – Stärke der ethnographischen Forschung: die Fähigkeit, im Zuge radikaler gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen re-konfiguriert zu werden. Akademische und öffentliche Debatten fokussieren die Effekte der Pandemie auf die Forschungspraxis in den ‚*hard sciences*‘. Vergleichsweise wurde wenig über die Veränderungen in den *social sciences* bekannt gemacht (Lems 2020). Es ist umso dringlicher, Reflexionen zu qualitativen Methoden voranzutreiben und nicht nur krisenhafte Alltage (Beck & Knecht 2012) im Kontext von COVID-19 zu beforschen, sondern um dem Anspruch des Mitvollziehens (Knecht 2009: 154) auch in Bezug auf die ethnographische Forschungspraxis gerecht zu werden. Dies hält das Kritisieren, Reflektieren und Modifizieren der Ethnographie in Gang – und wird insgesamt für die Wissenschaft post-Corona notwendig sein, denn in sie wurde nicht nur kurzfristig interveniert, sondern sie wird sich langfristig verändern.

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Near Co-Laborations. The VERSUS Project as Relational Epistemic Practice to Analyse the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The contribution discusses the formation and collaboration in the VERSUS project (*Versorgung und Unterstützung in Zeiten von Corona*/Provisioning and support in times of Corona) as a relational epistemic practice. VERSUS formed as research project to investigate how provisioning reconfigured during the pandemic in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The researchers involved come from different yet 'near' scholarly backgrounds: anthropology, sociology, and political theory. Such 'near' interdisciplinarity poses specific challenges and frictions for a co-laborative project. In analysing our own forms of working on working together, we aim to contribute to an emergent literature that focuses on co-laboration in projects of such 'near' disciplines used to take their differences serious. We discuss VERSUS through the notions of a) co-laboration, working with a shared epistemic orientation (*tertium*) for creating knowledge for specific fields, and b) collaboration as the everyday practice of working together during the unfolding pandemic. The collaborative software Slack enabled quick and less formal interaction, yet the instantness of the platform created challenging situations that we then discuss as important and generative moments in the project.

Keywords: co-laboration, comparison, interdisciplinarity, COVID-19, collaboration

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Introduction: Co-Laborative Devices Like This One

One year before we write these lines, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Germany, and we started conducting research on its consequences. What started as haphazard interviews formed into

a research project that now publishes results. Our situated practices of thinking and working together might in many ways not differ from other research projects, or at least this is not the claim of our chapter. Rather, writing the chapter gives us the possibility to reflect on the very practice of doing research as a team of five researchers from 'neighbouring' social and cultural science disciplines.

We situate our reflection in two strands of cultural anthropological/STS scholarship that foreground the practices of constituting scientific knowledge. The first focused mostly on the work of research scientists in laboratories and analysed the production of scientific knowledge as an often messy, disputed and incidental practical accomplishment. Karin Knorr Cetina coined the term "laboratory pragmatism" (1984: 107ff.) for how (lab) research is rendered rational, smooth, and uni-directional to make the respective research processes appear legitimate and to enhance the academic authority of the produced knowledge. We think that such reflection is fruitful to open conversations about the actual "doing" of research (Niewöhner & Scheffer 2010) and the translation work necessary in interdisciplinary projects (Callon 1986; Freeman 2009) by problematising polished narratives that smooth over frictions and frustrations. Interestingly, such STS research on doing research has only recently focused on the doing of social science research (Niewöhner & Scheffer 2010; Deville, Guggenheim & Hrdličková 2016; Kuznetsov 2019), an emerging literature to which we aim to contribute.

Secondly, scholars in STS and cultural anthropology turned their interest towards various forms of collaboration and co-laboration (Niewöhner 2016). The literature builds on scholarship on the co-creation of knowledge by ethnographers and research participants, specifically where participants are experts (Marcus 2018; Bieler et al. 2021). Jörg Niewöhner coined the term "co-laboration" (2016) to describe a form of co-constituting knowledge by and for disparate fields that we will specifically discuss throughout the paper. Yet instead of focusing on co-laboration between researchers and participants, we turn the focus on us as a research co-laboration itself. Such reflexive practice (Niewöhner 2021) adds to the aim of analysing social science as relational epistemic practices and to understanding some of the specificities of co-constituting knowledge together.

To ground our analysis, we will focus on concrete practice in the formation and ongoing research of the VERSUS-Corona project (*Versorgung und Unterstützung in Zeiten von Corona*/Provisioning and support in times of Corona) at the Institute for Social Research and Goethe University Frankfurt, conducted by the authors of this chapter. Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez Criado recently, in a volume on experimental collaborations, termed the co-produced publications or other products of creating knowledge with research participants "fieldwork devices" (Estalella & Criado 2018: 2). We borrow from this term in our attempt to apply concepts about co-laborations on VERSUS and will focus specifically on co-laborative devices – like this chapter.

Constituting the VERSUS Project

What later became VERSUS began in March 2020 when the number of COVID-19 infections in Germany reached almost 7.000 new cases per day. Anna and Andreas discussed whether to research the spread of the Coronavirus, its consequences for households, and the burgeoning uncertainty about contagion, contact, and politics. Soon, Almut joined these conversations in which stories about our concernedness, fears for the future, and ambivalent interest

in the unfolding of the pandemic merged. The three researchers come from different disciplinary backgrounds and follow other thematic interests in their work: Anna is a sociologist with a focus on practice theory doing research on age(ing), Andreas is an economic and political anthropologist researching socio-economic reconfigurations, while Almut is a political theorist, sociologist and urban anthropologist studying social movements. This constellation makes our initial research team a specific interdisciplinary collaboration. As experienced by us, our respective research fields are highly transdisciplinary themselves, as are our own academic biographies. Yet as PhD and Post-Doc researchers, we feel geared towards contributing to 'our' disciplines to increase chances to get jobs in highly competitive labour markets.

In this stage of thinking together about the pandemic, these presumed differences did not impact our collaboration much. We channelled our interest in the pandemic into an interview guide for some exploratory interviews, after which we wanted to further reflect on whether to do more research and where it should be going. In the unfolding of the pandemic, daily updates on political measures to contain the contagion, and the drastic consequences of, e.g., contact restrictions for households, speed seemed crucial. It made us want to gather data even more quickly. We settled on recruiting interviewees through our contacts, mailing lists, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. Meanwhile, we felt the need to somehow appear as more of an 'actual' research group rather than as what it had felt like in that moment: a gathering of three young researchers/friends interested in similar topics.

A crucial step in forming what we were doing was the transformation of our loose, interest-based group into a 'project'. Sandra Calkins (2016: 5) discusses pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in her work about uncertainty and future orientations and argues that a 'form', understood as a semantic device, compartmentalises and signifies action to address uncertainty. In an extension of the argument, addressing our knowledge practices as a co-laborative project meant forming what we were doing as a relatively stable entity in uncertain conditions instead of as a loose assembly of three junior researchers. Our 'form' is not particular to this research and formulating it as a project is akin to other projects that develop a joint plan and attempt to fund their endeavours. Yet in several ways, that appearance glanced over that we were still a somewhat loose assembly, with all researchers employed or funded elsewhere and, for most of us, no designated working hours of scientific contracts for our co-laboration. The semantic strategy we chose to compartmentalise and formulate our research collaboration as legitimate in neoliberal higher education and research was to provide form to our epistemic relationality by a project title and acronym: VERSUS-Corona. 'We' became VERSUS, and the young researchers turned into project leaders.

The project required additional labour to constitute itself as form: short texts, an argument and research design, and listings as e.g., in databases such as the World Pandemic Research Network. Also, VERSUS-as-project made it seem legitimate to attempt accessing funding, participation, and other support. Hence, the semantic strategy led to the increasing labour on what a project is and does, and soon from our constitution and legitimacy to interest and support from institutes with which we were affiliated.

At the end of March 2020, VERSUS received support from the Institute for Social Research Frankfurt am Main (IfS), the Research and Training Group Doing Transitions, and the Vienna Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology. The funders enabled us to engage in further studies by financing running costs, staff for transcribing interviews, and supporting the project with junior researchers Carolin and Georg who joined VERSUS. The project team had hence grown from three to five persons in just a couple of weeks.

In April 2020, VERSUS' team members conducted exploratory interviews. Based on the first findings, we developed a quantitative online survey that more than 1.000 households filled in, from which we chose a sample and conducted more than 40 in-depth interviews. We aimed to reconstruct those reconfigurations in which people were provisioning themselves with necessary goods and services.[1]

As the project team gathered more data and tried to contextualise their results with findings from other COVID-related studies, we came across an increasing number of projects by colleagues from our departments and university. To join forces with those projects and increase the visibility of social and cultural research on the topic, we initiated a research cluster 'SoKu Corona (*Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaftliche Forschung über COVID-19 an der Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main*/Social and Cultural Research about COVID-19 at Goethe University Frankfurt)'.

Through the consequent collaborations, we started working on a funding proposal for the German Research Foundation (DFG) with Sarah Speck and Franziska Vaessen, sociologists at Goethe University. They had researched the gendered reorganisation of private life during the first wave of COVID-19 in Germany. Our cooperations lead to a research training project (*Ethnographien des pandemischen Alltags*/Ethnographies of the Pandemic Everyday) to teach ethnographic methodologies in/of the pandemic, carried out with three student tutors.

Retelling the story of the constitution of a funded research project with around ten researchers, provides the background for our further discussion of VERSUS as a relational epistemic practice (Niewöhner & Scheffer 2010: 9). Specifically, as we were researchers from 'neighbouring' disciplines in which similar topics are researched with more or less disparate methodologies and concepts. This setting is crucial to the way we worked on working together in VERSUS. This assemblage of backgrounds and orientations differs from the collaborations focused on in the literature, where co-laborations of 'distant' disciplines and clearly 'divided' fields of knowledge are brought together. While the main challenge for those epistemically 'strange' presumably is how to be able to co-laborate at all, our co-laboration challenged us to work with probably minor but meaningful differences.

We will explore how we worked together by discussing what we will distinguish as modes of co-laboration and collaboration. The former will focus on our relational epistemic practices through co-laborative devices such as writing articles, the latter more on the socio-material aspects of working together virtually during the pandemic, through such software tools as Slack.

Collaboration and Co-Laboration: Epistemic Knowledge Practices Across Disciplinary Variety

Stefan Beck (2008), writing about collaborations between social and natural sciences, pointed to the necessity to de-mystify affirmative notions of interdisciplinary collaboration. He criticises common conceptions of joint research practices in two ways: 1) as wrought with internal epistemic hierarchies and non-understandings, and 2) as frequently coated over by a semantics of interdisciplinarity that makes collaboration appear smoother than it actually is (Beck 2008: 187). Instead, Beck states that working together does not require creating a non-

[1] From the closing of Kindergartens and schools to bottlenecks in market provisioning with, e.g. hygiene products or toilet paper, to the increase in neighbourhood initiatives and challenges for intergenerational care.

disputed shared understanding of the subject matter and argues that research benefits from critically reflecting implicit assumptions, divergent interpretations of evidence and validity, preferences for sorts of theory and methodologies. Jörg Niewöhner coined a term for such forms of working together while reaffirming differences: co-laboration (2016), which proves explicitly interesting for analysing interdisciplinarity between researchers from anthropology, sociology, and political theory.

Niewöhner stresses the importance of creating joint research problems that work both as a shared orientation of individual researchers and are timely for scholarship in the respective research fields. Instead of aspiring to mask or hide differences among researchers and their approaches, the concept of co-laboration starts from the generativity of these differences. It provides orientation as to how to deal with them productively. As a description of and orientation for our research team, a closer look at co-laboration is key for our own sense-making about working together. We attempted to balance our ongoing sense of both excitement and failure that has accompanied the research process by thinking about where our research orientations clashed. In that regard, it was crucial that we were not from 'strange' or 'distant' disciplines or fields of knowledge. Instead, we come from 'near' disciplines, being socialised to frame our work as young scholars in disciplinary terms, often by stereotyping what makes disciplinary others more 'other' than they might be. Hence, our frictions came less from approximation from fields imagined as distant but from embracing that our habits of disciplinary distancing needed to be challenged.

Understanding frictions as potentially fruitful served as an accompanying Leitmotif for the VERSUS project. It became apparent in several epistemic practices that we discuss in the next section before introducing some of the collaborative means we used for working together while being apart during the pandemic.

Co-Laboration in the VERSUS Project

In her chapter 'Making a Comparative Object', Kati Hannken-Illjes (2010) discusses a comparative ethnographic project she was part of. The research group consisted of four researchers, brought together as their thematic scholarship seemed to fit well to jointly analyse criminal proceedings. Hannken-Illjes describes several phases of frustration, making her turn to the question

> "How is it at all possible for four researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, communication, rhetoric, anthropology and law), with their data from four different countries and two different legal systems to compare this data?" (Hannken-Illjes 2010: 181)

The challenge of working with different theoretical backgrounds and epistemological orientations on a joint paper let the research team decide that they would not agree on any concept or theory from one of the respective fields. Instead, they introduced a *tertium comparationis*. The epistemic trick of the *tertium* is to introduce a broadly shared orientation from differing research interests (Hannken-Illjes 2010: 184). In our case, that *tertium* did the opposite, allowing us to engage with different orientations with shared research interests.

The speed and context of research in the developing first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic backgrounded what might otherwise have been a phase of intense conceptualisation that would have brought up the differences in epistemic conventions earlier. In the first phase of

the project, it seemed as if we talked about similar issues when grouping our research interests. Yet in two ways, co-laboration among significant others proved challenging: 1) in the overall orientation of the project and 2) in writing for disciplinary audiences.

The necessity to develop some common orientation or perspective came with the formalisation of our haphazard interest. To provide a framework that would work as a common orientation, we decided to settle on a perspective developed in Andreas's research on the socio-economic transformations in the Greek economic crisis called "reconfigurations of provisioning" (Streinzer 2019). This allowed us to connect the individual orientations – sociology of ageing, economic anthropology, and urban anthropology – with our common interest in how relational practices in/of age, care, and space transformed during the pandemic. With 'provisioning', as formulation of relational practices of providing support, we had found such *tertium* that allowed us to follow our orientations while getting to know us better as 'near others' when it comes to our disciplinary socialisation into academia.

Developed initially in the writing-up phase of Andreas's PhD thesis in economic anthropology, the perspective on reconfigurations of provisioning provided a not-yet thoroughly described research program. Andreas worked on the manuscript for his book, formulating the framework further while VERSUS unfolded. His attempts at translating developing thoughts into a possible *tertium* resulted in a back-and-forth movement between team members looking for a common orientation and the team needing to formulate their version of what 'reconfigurations of provisioning' might mean. This was a particularly tricky task as both the terms 'reconfigurations' and 'provisioning' exist in all the involved disciplines, but with a slightly different meaning: Whereas, for example, Anna stressed that reconfigurations should be analysed as processes of social practices, Carolin raised the question how 'provisioning' as a concept would differ from reproductive care work, while Almut tried to integrate the concept on common approaches in the field of urban studies and neighbourhoods. This negotiation was generative in refining our *tertium* and creating a new and shared orientation retrofitted to the material gathered in the exploratory phase of the project.

For such co-laborative devices as project descriptions, presentations, or reports, the shared orientation 'made sense' as it provided a somewhat flexible framework that conveyed a sense of direction while leaving each one of us enough space to work for and in our more specific fields of literature. These back-and-forth movements of trying to make sense of 'provisioning' from various perspectives helped refine the concept for multiple orientations of us as researchers. However, this loose *tertium* that allowed everyone to formulate their own version of the main concept we were all working with somewhat masked a challenge that would emerge later in the process: that we were not only working *with* provisioning as a concept but also *about* provisioning as a process. This challenge surfaced when working together with co-laborative devices. When presenting research or writing publications, a specific fragility of that overall orientation and relative neglect of the differences became visible. Writing for particular audiences meant that our co-laborative assemblage needed to orient itself towards more specific questions and literatures than what the overall orientation required. We will illustrate such a process by showing how we used a collaborative technique (the lead model) to structure how we could co-laborate and write together while writing for specific audiences and literatures that not all of us were familiar and/or at ease with. The differing conceptual uses of reconfiguration and provisioning impacted the way we analysed provisioning as process for these specific audiences. We will exemplify that lead model by describing the writing of a joint article called 'Familial intimacies' for a rapid turnaround issue of the journal Anthropology in Action: In the spring of 2020, several calls for papers

were issued by journals that quickly wanted to publish results from preliminary research projects on the pandemic.

Using the collaborative platform Slack (discussed further below), each team member proposed calls and ways to respond to them with arguments developed in our joint analysis. In an article for the journal Anthropology in Action (Streinzer et al. 2020), the team developed an argument around a 'cuddle curtain' produced to allow family members from risk groups to meet, touch, and care for one another while reducing the probability of contagion of the virus. We wanted to reflect on what provisioning might mean beyond the obvious shopping, caring, or acquiring income by writing the paper.

We started with a broad and lightheaded brainstorming, leading to an argument drawn from relational and post-relational approaches in anthropology, with which not all team members were equally familiar. Due to time pressure, the team settled on one lead member from anthropology to formulate the argument and draft of the piece. In a series of calls, we discussed the lead's proposal of an argument. Then, each team member formulated passages of the article and contributed with their analysis of specific aspects, which the lead would later 'sew together' into the joint argument. That 'lead model' meant proceeding again in a back-and-forth manner, with phases of individual work, compilation and coming up of revised drafts by the lead, discussions about the revised argumentation, and then again phases of individual work on the snippets.

The lead model brought a heightened pressure on the lead, supposedly the nearest to the audience we were writing for, to understand the individual orientations and formulate them into a joint argument. Not always did this work well. Fears mounted that the outcome could become a failure in all collaborating disciplines: too schematic for the anthropologists, too messy for the sociologists, and too inconsistent for the political philosophers. Drawing on Hannken-Iljes (2010) formulation of 'failure' above, it is exactly this struggle that would become generative: the necessity to choose from disciplinary conventions to 'lead' through the seemingly deficient argumentation. The writing was a translation of co-laboration into a common writing process through another *tertium*, this time an artefact to be described and analysed, a means by which knowledge is generated by a diverse team grouped around a common orientation, yet producing knowledge for specific thematic fields or subfields of disciplines: For example, in Andreas' field, it meant taking seriously the necessity to think economic relatedness as a combination of attachments and detachments, as a way to contrast the often implicit communitaristic bias on attachments in economic anthropology. For Anna's field of the sociology of ageing, it facilitated the decentring of the focus on older adults to the involvement of different actors, as well as the possibility to bring theories of ageing in a dialogue with critical gender studies (Carolin's area of expertise), and discuss the question what that dialogue could provide for the study of people living in nursing homes during the pandemic. All involved researchers would have approached those phenomena from slightly different angles. By structuring the co-laborative process through choosing a lead, specialised in the field for which the team wrote, the co-laboration was directed towards primary aims (contributions to that field) and secondary ones (new perspectives for other fields). Since, the team has used the model in further writing processes, e.g., about spatial inequalities.

Collaboration at a Distance: Slack and the Instant-Ness of Virtual Technology

As Niewöhner notes (2021: 111), knowledge is not only created in relational practices between researchers, but also in socio-technical assemblages. The shared epistemic work above, as exemplified through what we called co-laborative devices, was done in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and contact restrictions. In practical terms, the whole research team of VERSUS had never met in person between March and October 2020. We created a virtual working infrastructure of shared folders and messaging boards to facilitate communication. We used various forms of video-conferencing, from Skype to Zoom, and eventually Senfcall – a free and crowd-funded video tool more trustworthy in data security than Zoom.

In hindsight, what had the most influence on collaboration was the use of Slack, an app-based instant-messaging board designed for start-up projects, working with discussion threads. In such threads, we organised calls for papers, publications, the practical management of interviews and transcripts, and our observations about the research project. Although Slack, at the beginning of our use, just seemed a more elaborate tool to bring together scattered conversations that could have also been telephone calls or emails, it turned out to develop a life of its own as a collaborative means.

Meeting through Slack and Senfcall altered the atmosphere of us coming together as a team, e.g., as reflected in Caro's or Georg's experiences as junior researchers who joined VERSUS after its formation. Instead of meeting the (then established as such) project leaders of a research project in departmental meetings or through email, they met through Slack. With nicknames and profile pictures, the social media feel of the platform allowed a different way of dealing with hierarchies and experiential differences than in the usual conventions in German academia. Instead of the negotiation of how to address project leaders through conventions of politeness (e.g., 'Sehr geehrte Frau Dr.in Wanka' or 'Liebe Frau Dr.in Wanka'), communication felt more direct and approachable as 'Dr.in Wanka' was 'Anna' on the platform. The social media messaging with emojis and memes allowed a more informal communication between team members yet requiring them to actively and explicitly deal with issues arising from differences in experience, different positions in German academia and its hierarchies.

Besides the necessity to establish shared conventions of how to use Slack to negotiate different roles and divisions of labour, communication through the platform made collaboration seem more instant. That instantness produced a series of possibilities and frictions, which we want to illustrate by way of two examples: one being when we came across a close deadline for a conference; the other being the finalisation of the Anthropology in Action article. Although project work and publication pressure in academia generally led to increased pressure to produce, the start-up tools designed to facilitate fast collaboration had specific challenges for thinking and writing together.

The junior researchers worked three days a week, giving some temporal orientation about 'when' the project was working. However, the functionality, perhaps even governmentality (Wiedemann 2016: 77ff.), of Slack quickly blurred these lines when communication went on during the whole week in work-intensive phases. Slack's focus on chatting in threads facilitated over-work, as messages can be read instantly, an overstatement of the spontaneous availability of others. Sometimes, in weekly meetings, it was restated that important communication or decisions should be made on working days when all would have the chance to be present and informed. Occasions such as the following proved key moments to discuss

and establish informal rules on how to reconcile the speed and fun of brainstorming and serious play that Slack allowed with a caring attitude towards one another, including safeguarding researchers from overworking.

The first situation developed one Friday evening at the beginning of July 2020. One team member reminded via Slack of a close deadline for a call for participation at the conference of the Association of Social Anthropology in the UK and the Commonwealth. At the time, other team members were working at home, sitting on the tram, at home with friends, or hiking. Not everyone answered the urgent call; thus, only two of the researchers started brainstorming an abstract. When sending the draft abstract with the note that those two would be willing to present, the situation laid bare several challenges of such working sprints: two team members very active on Slack decided to go ahead with the abstract, at a time when not all members could answer or join. The abstract eventually did not make it to the conference, but the process led to a discussion about working hours and ‘when’ the team ‘is available’ for decision making.

Also, it gave rise to discussions about the different positions of the team’s researchers, with some not being paid for their work in the project but in the scramble for publications, a few months before contracts expired, while others were paid and sucked into the speed of 'producing' publications or conference papers. The conversations about the collaborative tool quickly turned into discussions about how to organise enthusiasm, precarity, and the need to publish and working hours in a project that we wanted to be both structured in terms of responsibilities and division of labour in a collaborative and caring manner.

The second situation was when that instant-ness made time seem more compressed, allowing to set deadlines at a fast pace. Such was the case with the initial ideas the team came up with for the Anthropology in Action article. The call for papers was posted, and some team members started brainstorming in an atmosphere of serious play and conceptual silliness, mixing jokes with literature discussions. The quick and intense coming together on Slack eventually led to the formulation of an abstract that was successful, followed by a peer-reviewed publication (Streinzer et al. 2020).

Such pace, facilitated by Slack's interface – to group around a theme, discuss, decide, and go ahead – proved highly effective but led to a kind of normalisation that instant quickness was possible and indeed normal. The challenges became apparent as we finished the final version of that article: the last two days were highly punctuated with deadlines of researcher’s contributions for the piece, and a language check and proof-reading at the end, due an hour before the journal’s deadline for the article. The instantness allowed us to schedule the working process in a fast succession of steps yet left little temporal room for manoeuvre when the editing process brought up way more questions than anticipated by the two researchers responsible for sending the article to the journal. The questions brought up, comments in the text, and re-formulations of the text were well thought through, yet the stress the deadline put us under made it impossible to consider all of them for the two researchers responsible for handing in the final version. The situation might well have come up in other projects, yet in our collaboration, it was further facilitated by the instant-ness co-produced by Slack's communication rationale.

These two situations highlight some key moments that led us to re-think and explicitly discuss our use of instant communication tools and the attempt to amplify their beneficial effects while handling the problematic aspects and the stress engendered by them for the individual researchers involved in the process.

Conclusions and Outlook

We discussed VERSUS, first as an emergent epistemic practice of five young researchers to make sense of the evolving pandemic, then as form-ed research project involving more than ten researchers, to critically reflect on the potentialities and challenges of such experimental collaboration. We proposed to explicitly discuss some of the frictions that arose in the project – whether through the different disciplinary backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, and political theory, or through the time pressure and unusual forms of communication. As we write this chapter in April 2021, the team still works mainly and at times only through the collaborative tool Slack and video-conferencing.

In our discussion, we distinguished between VERSUS as co-laboration in the sense of Jörg Niewöhner and as collaboration, meaning the actual everyday means of working together. In co-laboration, thinking together meant an at times quick back-and-forth between enthusiasm and frustration, as the different perspectives sparked new ways of thinking through issues. At the same time, it proved onerous in finding a common language, constantly reflecting on our own disciplinary conventions and the frictions raised by them for others. The necessity to balance this enthusiasm and frustration proved crucial for VERSUS. We illustrated our attempts to lessen frustration, e.g., in the lead model we used when writing an article for an anthropological journal. Further, we discussed the framework 'reconfigurations of provisioning' as a common orientation that anchored discussions and research while raising interesting questions in the specific research fields in which the involved researchers are doing research (sociology of ageing, urban anthropology, economic anthropology, cultural anthropology, political theory).

Our discussion of collaboration centred on the use of Slack. This collaborative online messaging app made the coming together as a team feel different than under usual circumstances of German academia. Instead of meeting in formal settings in which hierarchies could appear more pronounced, some of us met through the app, similar as in a social media environment with profiles, pictures, nicknames, and memes. The platform allowed the researchers to engage more directly and immediately with one another, both conducive and raising frictions about how one ought to use the platform and communicate on it. The crucial moments we discussed were when the instant-ness of the platform problematised working hours or led to decisions that not all team members were equally informed about. Finally, we discussed the simultaneity of allowing quick and playful epistemic work, which led to a publication in an international journal, and the compression of time in ways that lead to peaks in workload and stress to be avoided.

Both practices of and frictions created through co-laboration and collaboration proved, in our experience, not only frustrating but also fruitful. In this, practices of co-laboration and collaboration can be compared to practices of translation as formulated in Science and Technology Studies (Callon 1986). Such practices cannot be reduced to a passive act of mere transfer; instead, they are highly generative: they constitute communities of, and among researchers, they construct the research topic (problem or question) by contesting and re-shaping the disciplinary assumptions initially associated with it; they create reflexive innovation; and finally, they reconstruct the involved researchers themselves by subjectivising them into specific roles and positions (Freeman 2009).

Several factors might have increased the visibility of frictions in co-laboration in the VERSUS project, including the rapid development of both the research topic and the size of the

project in terms of people, money, tasks and technologies involved, and the disciplinary variety of the involved researchers. However, we want to argue that even though co-laborative frictions might become more visible in such circumstances, they apply to nearly every research project. These frictions, we argue, should not be repressed and hidden but instead explicitly taken up, reflected upon, and talked about as a matter of care in epistemic relations – specifically between near disciplines.

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Kulturanthropologie als Veränderungswissenschaft[1]

Manfred Faßler †

Zusammenfassung

Es sagt sich so leicht: unsere Welt *verändert* sich. Was aber verändert *sich* oder *wird* verändert? *Wodurch*, durch *wen*, *warum*? Cui bono? Leben wir in einer Welt „kreativer Zufälle", von denen der Physiker Klaus Mainzer (2007) spricht? Oder lenkt dies vom „Egoismus der Gene" ab, den der britische Biologe Richard Dawkins (1976) betont. *Geschieht* oder *passiert* Veränderung? Wird sie *gemacht*? Sind ‚Egoismen der Kultur', des Marktes, der Ökonomie daran beteiligt? Woher kommen diese? Welchen Sinn haben sie bei globalen Kooperations- und Konsensanforderungen? Und was ist zu tun, wenn sich herausstellt, dass die Bedingungen umwälzender Veränderungen menschengemacht und brutal und gewaltförmig sind, wie Saskia Sassen in ihrem Buch „Ausgrenzungen" (2015) beschrieb. Oder, wenn wir uns selbst, unsere Körper, unsere Seinsweisen, unsere Denkweisen absichtlich verändern, wir eine Cyborgisierung (Haraway 1991) betreiben? Muss Wissenschaft dann explizit politisch werden? Sollten die ersten Schritte eine „experimental respecification of sociality with digital technologies" (Marres & Gerlitz 2019, 3, Anm.1) sein? Mit diesen wenigen Fragen stelle ich *verändern* und *machen* in den Vordergrund meines Essays. Der Text ist ein Plädoyer für eine Kulturanthropologie, die sich dem reproduktiven Gattungsverhalten ebenso widmet wie Kultur-, Sozial-, Kommunikations-, Urbanisierungs-praxen, Kreativität, Maschinen- und Technologieentwicklungen.

Schlagwörter: Digitale Transformationen; 4. Industrie-kulturelle Revolution; Soziale Netzwerke; Kulturentstehung; new socials; Krise von Zusammenhängen; neue Kooperations-, Konflikt- und Konsensformate

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[1] Anmerkung der Redaktion: Kurz nachdem Manfred Faßler diesen Text für die vorliegende Ausgabe der Kulturanthropologie Notizen fertiggestellt hatte, verstarb er völlig unerwartet am 17. April 2021. Wir danken seiner Familie, dass wir seinen letzten Text in diesem Band veröffentlichen dürfen. Er gab uns damit in der ihm unnachahmlichen Weise viele wichtige Gedanken und Aufforderungen mit auf den Weg, den wir nun ohne ihn weitergehen müssen. Seine ihm eigene Textgestaltung in Form von zahlreichen Unterpunkten, Aufzählungen und kurzen Absätzen haben wir weitestgehend erhalten, nur fehlende Referenzen ergänzt und offensichtliche Fehler korrigiert.

Annäherungen

Dieser Text ist Versuch und Vorschlag zugleich. *Versuch*, weil eine Veränderungsforschung fehlt, auf deren sichere Begrifflichkeit ich mich beziehen könnte. Und *Vorschlag*, weil für Forschungs- und Theorieansätze noch einige Zeit mit Datennetzwerken, mit neuen Formen von Kulturalität und Sozialität „experimentiert" wird und werden muss, wie Noortje Marres und Carolin Gerlitz (2019) beschrieben.

Lebensverhältnisse, Kulturen und soziale Systeme verändern sich ständig. Der bekannte Orts-, Berufs- oder Tapetenwechsel verändert *individuelle Verhältnisse* wohl rascher als *soziale Systeme* verändert werden. Und *Kulturen* sind wohl die ‚langsamsten' von den dreien, gefestigt durch übergenerationale, religiöse, gruppenspezifische oder regionale Normpflege. Alle drei stehen derzeit unter erheblichem Druck digitaler Erschließung der Welt oder weniger pathetisch: durch die Erschließung von Gesellschafts-, Kultur- und Wissensräume als digitale Geschäftsfelder. Nicht nur eine Infrastruktur der technologischen Konnektivität verfestigt sich durch globales Nutzer:innen-Verhalten. Es bildet sich eine (global differenzierende) „Culture of Connectivity" (van Dijk 2013) aus.

Unterstützt wird die globale Informationsindustrie dabei von dem Umbau bisheriger Produktions-, Berufs-, Kommunikations- und Kooperationsregeln. Umbau meint: Alle angesprochenen Regelbereiche werden in Programme übersetzt, patentiert, mit Copyrights versehen und zur Vermietung auf dem Weltmarkt der Ideen und Realitäten angeboten. Eine weitreichende Enteignung früheren sozialen, institutionellen, kreativen, gestalterischen Wissens geschieht. Und zugleich entstehen neue, nicht mehr territorial zuzuordnende digitale, datenbetriebene Netzwerke. Deren Marketing wird über Versprechen von *enhancement, augmentation, elaboration* betrieben. An einer Empirie und Theorie zu *social augmentation* mangelt es noch, es sei denn, man akzeptiert „Programmed Sociality" nach Facebook- oder Google-Setzungen (Bucher 2013). Michel Callon fragte 2006 zu Recht: „Can methods for analysing large numbers organize a productive dialogue with the actors they study?" (Callon 2006).

Am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts zeigen sich Umrisse einer (daten-, medien-, informations-) technologischen Zivilisation, in der nicht nur das „Außen des Menschen" (Löffler 2019: 15ff.) das Lebensgeschehen massiv verändert. Konzepte von Individualität, Teilen und Teilhabe, von lebenslangem Lernen und lebenslang erforderlicher Kreativität, Subjekt und Solidarität, und Hirnforschungen[2], um nur wenige Dimensionen hier anzusprechen, werden in den techno-sozialen Netzwerken unter den Verbraucher:innenmodellen *Consumer, Prod-User* oder *User* neu verfasst.

Ungewiss ist, wie die intermediären Zusammenhänge von Regeln, Konventionen, Normen und Gesetzen morgen aussehen werden. Deutlich wird, dass massive globale Entwicklungen hin zu global verteilten Bereichs-Monopolen, wie *Amazon, Facebook, Google, TenCent, Huawei,* nicht auf irgendeinem Gerätepark aufbauen. Wissen, Unwissen, Arbeits- und Familiensituationen, kommunikative Fähigkeiten, kognitive Ressourcen, soziale und kulturelle Konventionen von Menschen tragen diese Verbreitungsformen der Cybertechnologien mit.

Der Vorschlag, über Veränderungswissenschaft nachzudenken, nimmt den Leitgedanken von Serge Moscovici (1990) auf, dass auch Technologie zur „menschlichen Geschichte der

[2] Hinweisen möchte ich auf die Arbeiten am Institut für Kulturanthropologie und Europäische Ethnologie der Goethe Universität, vor allem Deschauer et al. (2009) und Deschauer et al. (2014).

Natur" gehört. Gerade bei Technologie ist es auch Kultur, die Kultur macht, und nicht vorrangig „Natur der Kultur" (Mühlmann 2011). Die Datentechnologien sind in sich eine neue Organisation des Reproduktionsegoismus der Menschheit.

Milliarden Menschen, von Subjekten zu User:innen, Konsument:innen umbenannt, müssen binnen weniger Jahrzehnte neue Zusammenhänge, Verhältnisse, erfinden. Und sie lassen sich suchend, experimentell und ökonomisch gezwungen auf neue Maßstäbe für Genauigkeit, Beteiligung, Kollektivität, *Sharing*, *Debugging*, *Cookies*, *Data-Farms* ein.

Die Wortwahlen für diese Veränderungen sind unentschieden. Vom Computerzeitalter, von „wirklichkeitsindustriellen Komplexen" (Rheingold 1992), von ‚Großer Transformation' (Polanyi 1979; 2017 [1973]), Zeitenwende oder „Achsenzeit" (in Anlehnung an Jaspers 1949), sich computertechnologisch durchsetzenden „universale[n] Entwicklungsprinzipien" (Löffler 2019: 35), „Pax Technica" (Howard 2015) oder „4. Industrielle Revolution" (Schwab 2019) wird gesprochen. Es ist viel los auf unserem Planeten.

Welche ökonomischen, technologischen, wissenschaftlichen oder markteigenen *Treiber* Veränderungen beeinflussen könnten, ist nicht leicht zu sagen. Wie diese Veränderungen ‚kulturalisiert' werden, erst recht nicht. Ebenso schwierig ist die Beschreibung, wie sich soziale Verfassungen und kulturelle Konsensregeln verändern und als Regeln und Übereinkünfte gesetzt werden. Es sind die Menschen, die also das *Außen* (Löffler 2019) zu ihrem *Innen* machen, und neues Außen entwerfen.

Diese begrifflichen und methodischen Stolpersteine finden sich im selben Umfeld mit nicht unerheblichen Schwierigkeiten, technosoziale Kontexte fachlich beschreiben und erforschen zu können. Die Komplexität, von der so gerne alltäglich und in Konferenzen gesprochen wird, ist noch weitgehend unterbestimmt. Und dies gilt vor allem für die Zeit- und Sozialverhältnisse, für das ‚entworfene Morgen' und die damit verbundene gewünschte, geforderte, erwartete Kontinuität. Zeit entwickelt sich unter diesen Anforderungen zu einer sprachlichen Leerstelle, solange keine (beruhigenden, sachlichen) Umgangsweisen mit Nano- und Femto-Sekunde (10-9/10-12 sec) und mit Echtzeitkommunikation (also 1 sec Informationsunterschiede) eingeübt sind.

Wir benötigen eine kulturanthropologische Zeitwissenschaft der digitalen sozialen Netzwerke. Es lässt sich, im Markt- und Machtgestus, leicht von zukunftsrelevanten gegenwärtigen Prozessen sprechen. *Kulturanthropologie der Veränderung* wird sich mit Zeit und Zukunft als Kategorien der Wahrnehmung und des Entwerfens befassen müssen. Oder mit Fragen:

> Was sollen *programm-intelligente Maschinen* lernen, um lebensdienliche Vernetzungen zu ermöglichen?
>
> Wieviel *Warte-, Reflexions- Entscheidungszeit* muss dem Menschen belassen werden?
>
> Was darf eine *moral machine*, was eine *decision machine* ‚wissen' und entscheiden?
>
> Was dürfen Menschen über diese Maschinen, über ihre Betriebslogiken, ihre programmierten Aufträge wissen?

Und dies nicht nur gefragt in Richtung autonom fahrender Autos, sondern in Richtung *social/super scoring* (Gapski & Packard 2021), künstlich intelligente Öffentlichkeiten, *smart cities*. Und: wie bilden sich Subjektivität, Personalität, Wissen, Kooperation, Rollenstrukturen, Körperlichkeit aus unter Bedingungen von virtuellen Tele-Welten? Fachlich hilfreich könnte dafür der Praxis-Ansatz sein, der mit dem Konzept der Science Technology Studies (STS) (siehe Laboratory: Anthropology of Environment | Human Relations 2019) verbunden ist.

Mit wenigen Beispielen werde ich versuchen, mich der Machart und der Machtart gegenwärtiger technologischer, sozialer, kommunikativer, normativer Veränderungen zu nähern. Die Datenökonomien, die ich kulturanthropologisch berücksichtige, bilden Netzwerke globaler „Systeme der Umverteilung“ von Macht (Popitz 1992: 218ff.), und auch ihrer Reproduktion, ob als Informationsgesellschaft, Lebenslangen Lernens, Künstlicher Intelligenz oder Computerspiele. Die damit verbundene Vielfalt der Wechselwirkungen von Menschen, Maschinen, Technologien, Medien, Wohn- und Lebensweisen, Orten und Globalität werde ich nicht in diesem kurzen Text darlegen können.

Wichtig ist mir zu betonen, dass mit den digitalen Technologien nicht Maschinen-Parks gemeint sind, sondern Denk-, Organisations-, Verständigungs-, Entwurfs-, Koordinations-, Werbe-, Spiel-, Überwachungs- und Kontrollpraktiken.

Und diese Praktiken bringen soziale Zusatzräume hervor, die von Territorien, Gesellschaften nicht nur abgelöst sind. Sie schwächen deren Bedeutung durch vorläuferlose Vernetzungen, Varianten von Abhängigkeit, durch gigantische Märkte und Logistiken.

Datenökonomische Ereignishorizonte lassen ahnen, dass nicht nur Politik, Technologie und Ökonomie von der Zustimmung der Bürger:innen entkoppelt und neu verfasst werden. Überlieferte kulturelle, rechtliche, wissensökonomische Zusammenhänge werden, so lässt sich vermuten, ihre gesellschaftlichen Integrationsfunktionen zugunsten globaler, netztechnisch verbundener Kurzzeitsozialitäten einbüßen.

Kulturanthropologie könnte sich sehr rasch zeitlich, technologisch und ökonomisch instabilen Netz-Bevölkerungen und Moment-Kulturen gegenübersehen. Sie wird sich nicht nur mit einzelnen Veränderungen befassen müssen, sondern mit generativer Veränderung. Eine Schlussfolgerung ist, sich nicht stabiler Gemeinschaften oder Kulturen zu versichern, sondern eine Kulturanthropologie der Transformation, Konflikte, Kooperation, des Konsens, der Veränderungs-Praktiken zu entwerfen. Nun, es gibt sie noch nicht. Dies legt nahe, nicht entwerfend übermütig zu werden, sondern vom Versuch zu sprechen.

Für die Rückbezüge auf anthropologische Theorie und Forschungen habe ich unter anderen den Anthropologen Gregory Bateson (1996 [1985]; 1997 [1987]) und den Naturwissenschaftler Heinz von Foerster (2008) zu Rate gezogen. Ohne sie ständig zu zitieren, lieferten ihre Arbeiten beeindruckende und hilfreiche Beispiele für eine *systemische Anthropologie*. Sie sind für eine heutige Neufassung von kulturanthropologischer Forschung – aus meiner Sicht – sehr wertvoll.

Unterschiede und Muster

Der Politikwissenschaftler und Soziologe Colin Crouch notierte 2015 in seinem Buch über die Neoliberalisierung der Wissensbestände, die er als Bedrohung des „lebensnotwendigen Wissens“ ansieht:

> „Unsere Abhängigkeit vom Wissen verwandelt sich auf diese Weise schleichend in eine Abhängigkeit von solchen Vertretern privater Interessen, deren Verhalten sich lediglich in dem Maße an Moral und Ethik orientiert, in dem sie vom Markt dazu gezwungen werden – oder eben nicht.“ (Crouch 2015: 103)

Märkten gehorchend, hätten schon mehr Menschen von der „Fälschung von Informationen“, vom Baum des […] Bösen“ (ebd.: 239) gegessen, als von der „Erkenntnis des Guten“. Dieses

alte Wortspiel benennt Aktuelles: der Kontext und die Wahrheitsbedingungen von wissenschaftlichem Wissen werden derzeit nicht nur angezweifelt, – und dies nicht erst seit Donald Trump oder Margret Thatcher. In aktivierten Modellen des Maschinen-Denkens, -Entscheidens und -Lernens wird nicht nur das multisensorische Vermögen des Menschen verkümmert dargestellt. Die evolutionäre Anforderung des Denkens, der Wahrnehmung, der Kreativität, sich gegenüber anderem Denken, anderer Wahrnehmung, anderer menschlicher Kreativität zu beweisen, zu bekräftigen, wird banalisiert. Datenökonomie, hier verstanden als selektive, marktspezifische Anwendung der Datentechnologie, und Neoliberalismus treten gleichzeitig auf. Datenökonomie und Neoliberalismus verbindet die (be-)deutungsfeindliche „Fälschung von Informationen" (Crouch 2015).

Es sind Bestrebungen, sich völlig von den bisher entstandenen Sozialen Strukturen und Gruppierungen zu lösen, die produktive Differenzierung von Kulturen, Ethnien, Sozialen Verbänden, Sozialen Systemen, Wissensentwicklungen zu verlassen und nur auf ein (echtzeitiges) Reaktionsgeschehen zu setzen, auf formlose, entscheidungslose Daten.

Aber diese gibt es nicht. Jedes Datum setzt Unterscheidung und Entscheidung voraus, gerade dann, wenn Daten zu Informationen werden, also Bedeutungssteuerung durchsetzen. Sich auf Daten als formlose Unterscheidung zu berufen „is an evolutionary failing of the human brain" (du Sautoy 2019: 91). Sich auf den Consumer/User als einzige relevante formlose Unterscheidung zu berufen, ist eine Fehlentwicklung menschlicher Sozialverhältnisse, – obzwar machtpolitisch nachvollziehbar.

Marcus du Sautoy stellt in „The Creativity Code" heraus:

> „The lesson: the machine may be learning but you need to make sure it's learning the right thing. This is becoming an increasingly important issue as algorithms trained on data begin to affect society. Mortgage applications, policing decisions and health advice are being increasingly produced by algorithms." (ebd.: 97)

Kein *Datenstatus*, kein *errechneter Zustand* ist grund- und bedingungslos.

Keine Differenz, ob gegenständlich, sozial, kulturell, modisch, ästhetisch, oder als Schicht, Klasse, Community, ist voraussetzungslos. Es geht mir also um Voraussetzungen, Werden und Verschwinden von Formen, Zusammenhänge, Entscheidungen, kritische Konstellationen. Das alles schwebt im Hintergrund mit bei der Frage:

Welche inhärenten Wirkungen erreichen welche Lebensverhältnisse (und Dinge)?

Woher kommt die Angst vor Komplexität? (Vester 2019: 13–97)

Und welche enorm unterschiedlichen ‚Aufgaben' kommen auf Kontinuitätsträger wie Maschinenstrukturen, Ökonomie, Ethnien, Institutionen, Verhaltenskodierungen, Schulsysteme, Wissenssysteme und Subjekt / Person zu?

Die wenigen, über Colin Crouch, Marcus du Sautoy und Frederic Vester, angedeuteten Hinweise kündigen Forderungen an neue Bedingungen, Unterscheidungen, Formen sozialer Selbstorganisation an. Dabei sind die Entstehungsbedingungen von Ethnos, Demos, Kultur nicht denen von Maschinen, Programmen, Institutionen gleichgestellt. Dennoch: Dort, wo sie zusammentreffen, in den spezifischen Vernetzungen, in Wirkungszusammenhängen, haben sie viel miteinander ‚zu tun'. Und es wird mehr werden, je enger die Vernetzungen werden.

Digitale Maßanzüge, Konsumentenvölker, Deprogrammierung des Gesellschaftlichen

Auch wenn das Marketingversprechen der „sozialen Netzwerke“ und die Milliarden User:innen diese als ‚soziales‘ Regelwerk durchsetzen können, sollten wir wissenschaftlich und politisch-emanzipatorisch genau auf das *real-time using* sehen.

Nochmals kurz Marcus du Sautoy:

> „There have been calls for the industry to try to develop a meta-language that the algorithm can use to justify its choices, but until this is successfully done we may have to be more cautious about the impact of these algortihms in everyday life“ (du Sautoy 2019: 95)

Um dies nicht falsch zu verstehen: *Das Vorhaben*, die digitalen Welten zu erzeugen und fortzusetzen, – von Individualdaten, über Gruppen- und Verbunddaten, zu Produktionsdaten, computertechnischen Entwicklung von Bakterien und Viren, 3D-Druckerei von Häuserwänden, Schmuckstücken und künstlichen Herzen – *ist sozial, ökonomisch, wissensgeschichtlich unumkehrbar*. Und dennoch ist deren Programmierung und Gestaltung in Menschenhand. Es sind keine finalen Prozesse; sie sind in und durch ihre Milliarden Netzwerke in Computern und zwischen ihnen im ernsten Sinne ziellos.

Über Jahrtausende sind die Systeme der Zahligkeit (Numerosität), der Schriftzeichen, ihrer grammatischen Abstraktionen, der Mechanisierung und Maschinisierung, des Abacus, der Rechenmechaniken, bis zu Computern erfunden und angewandt worden. Der französische Anthropologe André Leroi-Gourhan hat in seinem Werk „Hand und Wort. Die Evolution von Technik, Sprache und Kunst“ (1980) diese Zusammenhänge ebenso wunderbar dargestellt, wie dies Serge Moscovici in seinem „Versuch über die menschliche Geschichte der Natur“ (1982) und Edward O. Wilson in „Die Einheit des Wissens“ (20013) tat.

Alle diese Arbeiten zeigen die inter- und transkulturellen Anpassungs- und Lernverläufe hilfreicher Modelle, Konventionen und Abstraktionen auf.

Dabei ist für die Computerdiskussion sicherlich wichtig, wie sich die „biography of a dangerous idea“ weltweit gestaltete. Charles Seife (2000) meinte damit „ZERO“, also die hilfreiche Erfindung der NULL im Hindus-Tal. Dazu gehört auch die Trennung der modernen Mathematik von der Philosophie (Peckhaus 2005), sowie die Eingrenzung bestimmter mathematischer Gesetze auf „Die Herrschaft der Regel“, wie die sehr lesenswerte „Grundlagengeschichte des Computers“ von Bettina Heintz (1993) titelt.

Die abstrakten Systeme gehören also in ihrer Erfindungs- und Anwendungsgeschichte zum Menschen und lassen sich als globale Lern- und Praxisverläufe darstellen. Und sie werden für immer mehr Bereiche sozialer Selbstorganisation bedeutend.

Gerade deshalb steht das Ringen um Vorstellungen des Sozialen, um deren Entwurf und Entwicklungen an, ebenso die neuerliche Kontroverse um Leben, Ästhetik, Architektur, von Gruppenzusammenhängen und -Kontinuität. Weder Gruppen, noch ‚Soziales‘, weder Demos noch Ethnos sind ‚externe Effekte‘ der Datenprogramme. Sie sind deren intelligente, affektive, unterscheidungsfähige Grundlage menschlicher Kooperation und Koaktionalität – und zwar als (instabile) *Praxis* der Menschen, *nicht als irgendeine Wesensbestimmung* von Menschengruppen.

Gerade auch wegen der gigantischen Schatten der Abstraktionsverläufe sind Veränderungen nicht einfach, aber, wie die Entwicklungsgeschichten zeigen: sie sind machbar. Auswege aus der Massendaten-Realität sind: Sinne, Wahrnehmung, Aufmerksamkeit, Reflexivität, und Konsens gegen die aggressiven Zeitökonomien, die Reduktion von Subjektivität auf User:innen-Dasein etc. zu stellen. Dies kann nur gelingen, wenn offengelegt wird, welche Organisations- und Ordnungsimperative in den Unterschieden angelegt sind, die digitalisiert werden.

Denn: „Numbers never start from a tabula rasa, but from a prefiguration of difference“ (du Sautoy 2020: 68).

Beschränken wir uns auf den Menschen als ‚user‘, trifft die Feststellung:

„This is an evolutionary failing of the human brain“ (du Sautoy 2020: 91).

In der viel zu wenig diskutierten und erforschten Dauer-Verbindung von *User* und *Social Networks* herrscht die Bit-Orientierung vor, die Datenmassen und Echtzeit. Begleitet ist diese von multisensorischer Körperorientierung, die Daten über Augenbewegung, Schreibkommunikation, Farbwahl, Schreibgeschwindigkeit ‚absaugt‘. Auch die schrift- und bildkulturellen Dimensionen von Verständigung, also die indirekte Kommunikation, werden ins Digitale der Plattform-Globalität der Big Nine (Webb 2019) und der Monostruktur >User & Social Network< zerlegt.

Aber:

Zu welchen sozialen Großgefügen gehören ‚social networks‘?

Stehen sie für einen bislang nicht empirisch unterlegten Trend zur „Weltgesellschaft“ (Luhmann 1984)?

Oder sind die Ordnungsgiganten der Netzwerk- und Plattform-Kapitale (sei es Amazon, Google, GPS, Galileo, Alibaba, TenCent, etc.) an die Stelle von Gesellschaften, Demos, Ethnos, regionaler Kultur getreten?

Bleibt von der geografischen ‚Region‘ nur noch der Gemüseanbau, zelebriert bei EDEKA, Rewe, Lidl., während sozio-kulturelle und soziale Präsenz in ‚social networks‘ beheimatet werden?

Bilden sich in den fortwährend erweiterten Verbindungen, in der sogenannten Algorithmisierung von ‚social network‘ eine Systematik nach-territorialer (topologischer) vorläufiger Kulturen und Sozialverhältnisse aus?

Möglich ist‘s.

Umso mehr müssen sich Wissenschaften um eine Art (begriffliches, empirisches, konzeptionells) *re-framing* kümmern, um die *Erforschung von Online-Offline-Populationen*, deren Umgang mit sich selbst, deren Kooperations- und Kollaborationsfähigkeiten. Damit verbunden sind Anforderungen an Forschungs- und Theorieentwürfe, die nicht der (kausalen, linearen) Funktionalität folgen, sondern Wechselwirkungen. Diese lassen sich als Bedingungen „maximalen Stresses“ (Mühlmann 2011) oder als Zustand ko-evolutionärer Stressregulierung (Faßler 2009; 2014) erfassen.

Wichtig ist mir die Feststellung:

Kein Daten-Paket, ganz gleich welcher Komplexität, führt zu lebensdienlichen Zusammenhängen oder Erklärungen. Das Soziale des Homo sapiens ist keine genetisch determinierte Praxis, kein technologisch determinierter Befehlsraum, ist nicht dem Termitenbau

oder einer Ameisenkolonie vergleichbar. Strukturen, Dinge, Verständigung, Absicht, Vorausdenken, Anpassen, unterscheiden und entscheiden und etliches mehr, werden herangezogen werden müssen, um die Kapazitäten des Sozialen und Kulturellen grundlegend und in dem Daten-Universum zu verstehen.

Kein Datenereignis ist automatisch Teil eines Maschinengefüges. Es sind in weitem Sinne sozio-kulturelle, techno-ökonomische Dinge, die dazu beitragen. Wir müssen uns schon um deren Verbindungen bemühen, sie deuten, erklären, fördern oder verhindern.

Die aktuell werbend geforderte ‚Digitalisierung' der Schulen, Universitäten, Kindergärten, Wohnungen (Home-Offices) sollte mit den Fragen verbunden werden:

Welches Lernen, welches Wissen, welches Wohnen, welches Vertrauen wollen wir?

Und welche Gruppen bemühen sich um welches Wissen etc.?

Welche Beiträge können Wissenschaften und Wissenschaftler:innen leisten.

Und: Was sollen die fortschreitend lernfähigen Algorithmen lernen? Zumal sie ja auch in Schulen eingesetzt werden (sollen).

Das alles ist hier nicht zu beantworten. Der Versuch eines kleinen Überblickes lohnt sich aber.

„End of" oder: Sorge um die begriffliche Ordnung?

Veränderung lässt sich als *offene, anpassungssensitive* Entwicklung denken, uns*charfen* Gesetzen (Riedl 2000; 2003) der Kooperation eigen. Das heißt: Es gibt für keinen ‚sozialen Zustand' irgendeine normative Mengenvorgabe, weder für Bevölkerung, Berufsgruppen, noch für Klassen, Schichten. Vielleicht für die Zahl von Bandmitgliedern bei Boy-Groups oder Tanzwettbewerben, Fußballmannschaften – nun, darum geht es mir hier nicht.

Die Menschheitsgeschichte, damit auch unsere vielfältige Gegenwart, hat nicht nur

Energie (Feuer/Wärme/Architektur/Mobilität/Bekleidung/Wohnen),

Metabolismus (Ernährung, Jagd, Sesshaftigkeit, Kunstdünger, Nahrungsindustrie, Hunger)

und

Informationen (multisensorischer Körper, Nachricht, Wissen, Experiment, Handwerk, Bildlichkeit, Numerosität)

im Gepäck.[3]

Zur Geschichte gehören vielfältige Formate des *Sozialen*, der Organisation als Sippe, Familie, Dynastie, Dorf, Stadt, Reich, Staat, Diktatur, Demokratie, als Kollegialität, Genossenschaft, Nachbarschaft, Chor, Gemeinde, Orchester, Rockgruppe. Übergänge zwischen alldem können individuell, kollektiv, verfahrensgerecht, partizipatorisch ‚geschafft' werden, durch klare Zeitabsprachen, Verabredungen, Konzertbeginne. In ihrer Verallgemeinerung als Bestandteile komplexer Sozialsysteme bleiben Momente der Entstehung, Vielfalt beteiligter Ideen und deren Wechselwirkungen unscharf.

[3] Siehe auch: Entwurf des Energie-Metabolismus-Inforation/EMI-Models in Faßler 2009: 287–291.

Anthropologie und Soziologie, die ich hier in die Waagschale lege, müssen auf die evolutionäre ‚*Unschärfe*' (von Foerster 2008; Iser 2013) ihrer Arbeitsbegriffe nicht nur vorbereitet sein und reagieren können. Sie sollten ihre Begriffs- und Forschungsregeln in Vorläufigkeit, in „context-sensitivity" (Iser 2013: 193ff.) begründen.

Hart dagegen gerichtet war die Proklamation von Chris Anderson, führender Computerentwickler in den USA, am 23. Juni 2008. An diesem Tag titelte er: „The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete" (Anderson 2008). Datenmassen, damals in Petabytes summiert, würden jede wissenschaftliche Bedeutungssuche sozialer oder individueller Prozesse überflüssig machen. Die sich selbst rechnenden Datenmengen zeigten: „All models are wrong, but some are useful" (ebd.). Kausalität sei überflüssig und als Methode falsch. Neben der damals schon viel gepriesenen „Connectivity" stand der Satz: „Correlation is enough". Daten, deren Programmsprachen eine Schaltung erlaubten, die sich also ‚verstanden', sollten ausreichen, um soziale Zustände zu diskutieren. Dies ist Teil des Unsinns, nur Datenmassen könnten den Menschen bei der Lösung von existenziellen oder funktionalen Problemen helfen. Der Wirtschaftspsychologe Claus Triebel brachte dies am 02.07.2013 auf den Punkt: „Korrelation ist […] die neue Kausalität" (Triebel 2013).

Der Weg für Big Data wurde so gezeichnet (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013). Vieles ist auf diesem Wege auch so gekommen: Entlastet von gesellschaftlichen Verantwortungs- und Zusammenhangs-Diskursen baut die Big Data-Ökonomie (irgendwann Plattform-Ökonomie genannt) von Google, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon etc. eine Gegenwelt zu allem auf, was nicht digitalisiert wird, und zu allen Sozialverhältnissen, die bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt durch ethische, sozial-staatliche, solidarische Prüfungen legitimiert wurden. So steht hinter dem „End of Theory" auch ein „End of Policy", – und auch ein Eingang zu Verschwörungs-Ideologien aller Art.

Obwohl ich biografisch den Computertechnologien der Jahre 1980–2000 nahestand, halte ich die völlige Abspaltung von Theorie, Normativität, sozialer Verantwortung, soziokultureller Wechselwirkung für bedrohlich.

Ich betone hier ausdrücklich den wissenschaftlichen Bedarf an geordneten Häufigkeiten, also Empirie. Und den Bedarf an Theorie. Die Zahlen, Korrelationen, Zusammenhangsmodelle und so weiter müssen methodisch überprüfbar sein. Gerade gegen wissenschaftliche Methoden richtet sich Chris Anderson (2008). Für die Kritik an den Mainstreams von *Big Data, Social Scoring, Cambridge Analytica* heißt dies: nicht Ende von Theorie, sondern Offenlegen der Programmierlogiken, der kulturellen Ordnungsimperative, der Pflichtenhefte, und (inzwischen) der monopolen Machtabsicht. Die monopolen Verwaltungen der Massen von (entkräfteten) Unterschieden führen dazu, dass die Ansprüche auf eine lebensdienliche, bis in jede Individualität hineinwirkende und garantierte Lebenswelt tendenziell verunglimpft werden.

Das „Ende der Theorie" steht dann für das *Ende politischer Legitimation oder auch für das Ende von Bedeutung*. Hiergegen müssen sich die Fächer wappnen, über die ich hier schreibe. Zahlreiche Ansätze liegen vor, die sich dem Theorie-Abgesang von Anderson nicht unterwerfen. In allen geht es darum, die Bedeutungsvielfalt von sozialen Differenzen nicht nur zu ‚managen', sondern in ihrer Wertigkeit für intelligente, kreative und demokratische Entwicklungen neu zu bestimmen.

Auf wenige möchte ich hier nur hinweisen. So Stefania Milan (2015) „When Algorithms Shape Collective Action", Emily van der Nagel (2018) „Networks that work too well", Anne

Helmond (2013) „The Algorithmization of the Hyperlink“, José van Dijck et al. (2019) „Reframing platform power“ oder auch Nick Couldry und Hendrik Jenkins (2014) „Participations: Dialogues on the Partcipatory Promise of Contemporary Culture and Politics“. Diese Arbeiten beruhen alle auf dem Gedanken, dass die technologische Durchdringung der Sozial-, Kultur-, Wissensbestände irreversibel ist. Und sie fordern neue Einsichten in die *Entstehung*, Art der *Kontinuität, Entwicklung* sozialer Zusammenhänge ein, indem sie sich gegen den ‚Großen Abschied‘ von Theorie und Bedeutungskonflikten nach Anderson richten.

Die Suche nach den Bedingungen von Sozialität löst sich nicht nur von „Wired Magazin“, dem Publikations-Organ der Thesen von Anderson. Distanz lässt sich auch finden gegenüber den Strategie-Papieren von Google, Microsoft, Facebook – sofern öffentlich zugänglich. Die angesprochene ‚Suche‘ schloss und schließt mit ein, nicht nur den Digital-Technologien gegenüber kritisch zu sein, sondern auch gegenüber den überlieferten Relationen zwischen Industrie, Bürokratie, Normen, Institutionen und Individuum, Subjekt, Gruppe, Kultur.

Das „stählerne Gehäuse“ der Schwerindustrie, von dem der Soziologe Max Weber zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts sprach, rostet nicht nur; es wird zum Überbleibsel, zur Ordnungsruine. Tritt an seine Stelle die Organisationsmacht der Datenströme, der Echtzeitkommunikation, technogene *Smart-Cultures*, irgendwie/irgendwo verteilt in den Netzwerken der Welt? Nortje Marres und Carolin Gerlitz (2019) brachten die Situation auf den Punkt: „On the experimentalization of sociality in digital environments, detecting sociality with social media“. Beides: Entwicklung und Experiment zeigen auf, dass es keine endgültigen Synthesen des Menschen mit egal welcher Umwelt gibt. Damit liegt Verantwortung für die Art der Eingriffe bei uns Menschen. Und einen Verantwortungsbereich bilden Wissenschaften.

Kultur, unabsichtlich / absichtlich

Welche Formen der sozialen und kulturellen Selbstorganisation werden uns Menschen unter den Bedingungen der globalen „Vierten Industriellen Revolution“ (Schwab 2019), kurz: „Industrie 4.0“, begleiten?

Schaut man genauer hin, ist die Frage ein Schwergewicht.

Denn sie legt offen, dass wir uns wissenschaftlich damit sehr schwertun, Entstehung, Dauer, kognitive Wirkungen, soziale und kulturelle Verbund- und Zusammenhangslogiken von den Formationen zu erklären, die wir Kultur oder Soziales nennen.

Deren Entstehung, Wirkungsweisen, Veränderungen sind multiple Prozesse. In ihnen (und an ihnen) sind u.a. Naturgesetze, Gesetze des „extended phenotype“ (Dawkins 1982), des expressiven, entwerfenden, gestaltenden menschlichen Lebens, der Produktion, der Macht, der Sesshaftigkeit, komplexer Lernverläufe, ortsbildende Hierarchien, Mobilität, politische und rechtliche Verfassungen ‚aktiv‘ beteiligt. Ändert sich diese (nicht-intentionale) Gesetzes-Bindung, wenn man auf absichtlich ‚gestaltete‘, vererbte, ‚vererbbare‘, ‚gepflegte‘ Lebensweisen deutet, um die es bei Ethnos, Demos, Kultur, Identität, Subjekt geht? Keineswegs.

Die Frage, welche Sozialformen uns begleiten werden, führt, wie alle genannten Wörter, nicht in vermeintlich zufällig entstehende Verhältnisse. Schon gar nicht heute und in den kommenden Jahrzehnten. Wenn Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Facebook und IBM 2016 eine „KI-Partnerschaft ins Leben“ rufen mit dem Ziel, „Bewusstsein für KI zu fördern, …bewährte Praktiken zu den Herausforderungen und Chancen auf diesem Gebiet zu formulieren“, so Satya Nadella, CEO von Microsoft (zitiert nach Schwab 2019: 7) so geht es um „Zu-

gang zu Informationen demokratisieren“ (ebd.: 8), um „standortunabhängige“ Demokratisierung (ebd.: 9), darum, „das regulatorische Umfeld“ eben standortunabhängig zu „revitalisieren“ (ebd.: 9). Demos, Ethnos, Kultur, Vertrauen werden als Produkte erkennbar, – fern der Idee irgendeiner Essentialität. Technologie als grundlegende Dimension der Sozialverfassung wird nicht angesprochen.

Diesen strategischen Muskelspielereien von Satya Nadella steht entgegen: Auch Microsoft oder Baidu, auch Amazon oder TenCent, können nur Naturgesetze und über lange Entwicklungsverläufe entstandene kognitive Fähigkeiten *anwenden*.

Mit Natur zu verhandeln, gelingt auch ihnen nicht. Allerdings gelingen ihnen massive Eingriffe in die menschengemachten Kommunikationswelten, in visuelle Anschauung, räumliche, zeitliche, örtliche Wahrnehmung, Denkgewohnheiten, Sozialkonzepte. Mit ihren globalen User:innen-Völkern schaffen sie den Abschied von der schwerindustriellen und bürokratischen Moderne, im Gewand ihrer Produkte: Fernsehen, Telefonnetz, Automobilität, Überwachung, Social Networks. So entstehen machtpolitische Positionen durch virtuelle Realitäten, *Second Life*-Angebote, Online-Sozialität, Globale Community-Märkte (Social Networks genannt) etc. Sie beeinflussen Entstehung und Erhalt von Sozialsystemen, legen die Variationsbreiten von Kultur, Wissen, Gestaltung, Infrastruktur, Transport- und Speicherlogistik fest.

Aber es ist nicht nur ihre Funktionsmacht, die kritisch zu betrachten ist. Es ist auch die Ignoranz gegenüber vernetzten Naturgesetzen und das falsch gedachte Verhältnis von Technologie/Produktion/Ökonomie und von im weiten Sinne Kultur. Dem angedeuteten Machtgestus entstammt das Modell, Soziales und Kultur seien „externe Effekte“ (so mehrmals bei Schwab (2019) zu lesen), oder, nochmals Nadella (zitiert nach Schwab 2019: 7): „Hinter jeder Erfahrung steht Künstliche Intelligenz, die unsere menschlichen Fähigkeiten um Erkenntnisse und Prognosekräfte erweitert.“

Ich gehe von einem umgekehrten Verhältnis aus. Hinter jeder Variante „künstlicher Intelligenz“ stehen komplex zusammengesetztes Wissen und Entscheidungen über deren Anwendungsbereiche:

Kultur und Soziales sind keine „externen Effekte“.

Sie sind für menschliches Leben konstitutiv, auch für Ökonomie und Künstliche Intelligenz.

Geht man von der ‚Vorherrschaft‘ des Digitalen aus, wirft dies die Frage auf: Wie lässt sich Kultur und Soziales formulieren, wenn das Prinzip ökonomischer Reproduktion dasselbe ist, wie das sozialer Kommunikation, der Wissensspeicherung, der Spiele, des Entwerfens, der Verabredungen: eben digital? Erodieren die klassischen Moderne-Unterscheidungen, die seit circa 200 Jahren das Phänomen des ‚Bürgerlichen‘ profilieren? Die Fragen an die gegenwärtigen Transformationsverläufe müssten lauten:

Wieviel Gesellschaft, wieviel souveräne Kultur verträgt globale Technologie?

Wieviel Demokratie verträgt sie?

Wieviel und welche Form von Ethnos verträgt globale Künstliche Intelligenz, globale Netztechnologie, Geoökonomie?

Können diese Kategorien noch als Referenten für Volks- oder Kultur(en)souveränität aufgerufen werden?

Kurzgefasst:

Wir wissen, wie ein Algorithmus arbeitet. Ist er als selbstlernender Automat konzipiert, wissen wir nicht, wohin sich die Schaltungsinhalte entwickeln. Sollten Menschen nur von den Ergebnissen lernen, deren Zustandsordnungen adaptieren, damit umgehen, werden sie die Gründe und die weiteren Folgen dieser lernenden/entscheidenden/moralischen Maschinen auch nicht kennen lernen.

Aus meiner Sicht mangelt es an einer Kulturanthropologie der Abstraktion.

Es reicht nicht, sich Archäologien und Archiven zu widmen, sich auf Tradierungen und Traditionen zu konzentrieren. Deren Erfolg für das Verständnis der Herkunft von Gruppen, Verhalten, Moden, Architekturen, spezifischen Repräsentationen steht damit nicht in Abrede. Es geht mir dabei eher um die Erforschung von entstandenen, gemachten Differenzen und den Entscheidungsgründen, einen spezifischen Weg zu normieren, zu ordnen, zur offiziellen Ordnung zu machen, zu repräsentieren und zum Referenzsystem zu erhöhen. Erst, wenn wir diese Prozesse als Modelle entwickelt haben, werden wir auch auf die Komplexität von erdachten Datenwelten, Datenordnungen, von entworfenen Wegen, Daten als relevante Informationen zu verwenden, Einfluss nehmen können.

Erforderlich ist

Wissen um die verallgemeinerten Abstraktionen, mit denen wir Menschen unser konkretes Leben gestalten, und

Wissen um die Praxen, die die Gründe der digitalen Transformationen offenlegen können, um sie zu verändern.

Dies ließe sich als Kulturanthropologie der Infrastrukturen, der (soziotechnischen, kybernetischen) Netzwerkbildung, ausweiten.

Bleiben wir bei der Frage, mit welchen Mustern die 5 Milliarden User:innen ihre Verbindungen pflegen, mit welchen sozialen, ethischen, humanitären, demokratischen Normen sie jeden Tag ihre Accounts öffnen und bedienen. Wenn die beiden Google-Vordenker Eric Schmidt und Jared Cohen und ihr Büchlein „The New Digital Age" (2013) mit dem Satz eröffnen: „Soon everyone on earth will be connected" und dies mit dem Versprechen verbinden: „We will offer You a kind of social contract", stellt sich mir die (europäische) Frage: Wie sind die Motivlagen der User:innen? Wie stehen Offline-Realitäten zu Online-Realitäten? Können sie kollaborieren? Gibt es „patterns" (Bateson 1996 [1985]) dafür? Oder lassen sich diese entwickeln? Gelten diese trans-kulturell? Definieren sie erdweite Gruppenzusammenhänge, die über die Berufstreffen im Flughafen, Stake-holder Konferenzen oder Flash-Mobs hinausgehen?

In diesen von uns Menschen erzeugten und belebten Realitäten entscheidet sich, in welcher Weise uns lebensdienliche Organisations- und Reproduktionsweisen entstehen. Oder aber, ob wir bei der Bewältigung von Lebensgeschick einknicken, langfristig versagen.

Umgekehrt heißt dies: keine einzige menschliche Lebensorganisation ist genetisch determiniert. Kein Hammer, keine Zisterne, keine Computermaus, kein Programm sogenannter künstlicher Intelligenz ist ‚vorgesehen', keine Herrschaftsform lässt sich ohne Machtinteressen (Popitz 1992) ‚bauen'.

Wir, der Mensch, sind unsere eigene generative Realität.

Es gibt für diese Andeutungen etliche grundlagentheoretische, ordnende Begriffe, sei es Komplexität (von Foerster 2008), Emergenz (Iser 2013), Netzwerke (Riedl 2000), kreativer Zufall (Mainzer 2007), Autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela 2015 [1990]), Kontingenz und Ironie (Rorty 1992) u.v.a.m. In allen sind zwei fordernde Empfehlungen enthalten:

> Vermeide endgültige Aussagen, denn kein biografischer, sozialer, kultureller, kognitiver Lebens-Zustand ist Endzustand.
>
> Und:
>
> Hüte Dich vor Konzepten geschlossener Identität oder Wesentlichkeit, ob individuell, gruppenspezifisch oder sozialsystemisch.

Ringen um Abstraktion und Anwendung

Es gibt keine ‚Eigenentwicklung' einer Maschine, keine ‚natürliche' Begründung für irgendein Werkzeug, irgendeine Maschine oder Technologie. Der Mensch ist und bleibt der entwerfende, eingreifende Akteur (Moscovici 1990; Kelly 1997; Boyer 2002; Schurz 2011), bleibt ein umweltgebundenes Selbst. Technologien sind 100 Prozent menschengemacht. Soziale Selbstorganisationweisen ebenso (Wilson 2013).

Menschen ringen seit Jahrtausenden um und mit den Abstraktionen, die ihnen einfallen. Es sind die oft besprochenen bild-, zahlen-, schriftsprachlichen Systeme *Zweiter Ordnung*. Und sie ringen um die *Praxis*, um anpassendes Verhalten, um die Entzifferung ihrer Konkretion, um Anwendung, Verbreitung, Nutzungsbedingung der – im weiten Sinne – Techniken. Es ist dies immer ein Ringen um Wissen, Verfügungsrechte, Macht, um Reproduktionsverhältnisse und Lebensweisen. Und dieses Ringen nimmt die verschiedensten Formen des „Transfers von Information" zwischen Menschen und Menschengruppen an, „unabhängig davon, ob dieser Transfer auf genetischen, epigenetischen oder phänotypischen Bahnen erfolgt" (Wieser 2007: 150f.). In den Transfers und durch sie entstehen Gruppen, Schichten, Hierarchien, Organisationsweisen, Legalisierungen. Somit lassen sich Forschungen zu jenen Gruppen, Ethnien, zu Demos und Anthropos nicht von den erfundenen Dingen, nicht von erfundenen Formaten der Selbstorganisation lösen.

Wir, Homo sapiens, kon-struieren und kon-figurieren. Wir ‚klären uns auf' oder verdummen uns epochenweise, wir bauen, reißen ab, lassen verfallen, erfinden und nutzen Schriften, Zahlen, Formeln, Regeln, wir zimmern Aktenschränke und füllen diese mit gedanklicher und organisatorischer Lagerware, und sind stolz auf die abgeschlossene(n) Geschichte(n).

Es ist ein grundlegender Identitäts-Fehler, denn: Nichts in der Entwicklung des Menschen ist ‚abgeschlossen', nicht einmal die Biologie des Menschen. Wir sitzen oder stehen nicht nur ‚auf den Schultern der (Erkenntnis-) Riesen', nutzen nicht nur die Straßentrassen, die die Römischen Heere vor 2000 Jahren durch Europa bauten als Topografie der Autobahnen. Wir nutzen Alphabet, Zahlen, Rechenweisen, Materialkenntnisse, Mechaniken und vieles mehr, allerdings auf unsere Weise. Und wir verändern unsere Körperlichkeit ebenso, wie wir massiv in jedwede Umwelt eingreifen. Nun will ich nicht in Geschichte, nicht in Ökologiediskurse ausweichen.

Die Frage ist:

Wie beeinflusst das immer wieder neue Ringen um Abstraktion, Entwurf, Gestaltung unser kooperatives, kollaboratives, konflikthaftes, konsensfähiges Denken?

Wie entstehen Auswahlmuster, wie deren selektive Anwendung? Wie werden Machtgefüge hervorgebracht? Wie Konzepte und Realitäten von sozialer Gruppenorganisation, nennt man diese nun Ethnos, Demos, Plebs, Barbaren oder ‚fremde Nachbarschaft'?

Und was genau benennen diese Wörter kategorial?

Das werde ich hier nicht auflösen können. Ich bleibe bei den Verhältnissen, die Menschen mit Dingen, Dingen mit Menschen haben und beziehe mich dabei auf die *mediale Selbstbefähigung des Menschen* (Faßler 1996), *mediale Interaktion* und auf den Forschungsrahmen, den ich beim Antritt der Professur an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt umrissen habe: eine *Anthropologie des Medialen*.

Inzwischen ist es erforderlich geworden, die *Anthropologie der Dinge, Abstraktionen und Medien auszuweiten in die Erforschung der Transfers von Wissen um Dinge, Organisation, Management, Ökologie, um nur weniges hier anzusprechen*. Nicht nur der „Stammbaum des Homo sapiens (ist) kein übersichtliches und wohlgeordnetes Muster" (Maddox 2000: 298). Dies betrifft auch jede Handlungs-, Technologie- und Organisationsebene.

Welt-Dinge und Ausbleichen von Kultur?

Der jüngste Stand der Dinge ist: Sie, diese Dinge, sind keine Einzelwerke mehr, kein *Personal Computing*. Auch, wenn es ungewohnt zu lesen ist: Wir befinden uns in der Epoche eines „Social/Global/Total Computing", dem die Wörter und Sprachen abgerungen werden müssen, mit denen die Anschlussfähigkeiten von Ethnos, Demos, Selbstbestimmung und Selbstorganisation als Dimension eines *technologischen Humanismus* benannt und betrieben werden können.

Verharmlosen, verteufeln oder neutralisieren gilt nicht mehr. Auch gilt nicht mehr, die kulturelle und soziale Verfassung von IoT, Smartness-Konzepten, Kreativitäts-Modellen, Konferenz- und Erziehungsmodellen von ONLINE-Angeboten zu ignorieren. Einzelgeräte der PC-Generation sind nicht mehr die springenden Punkte, mit denen sich Wissenschaften befassen müssen. Lange schon geht es nicht mehr um PONG, dem Tennisspiel gegen oder mit Computer und Interface (was mich bei meinen Kneipenbesuchen der 1970er begleitete).

Alle Sozialverfassungen der Welt, die Digitalwirklichkeiten auf sich anwenden, verändern sich massiv. Und in ihnen werden

Subjekte zu User:innen,

Institutionen von datenmonopolen Netzwerken überlagert,

Soziales wird durch Plattform-Kapitale, durch „intangible capital" (Haskel & Westlake 2018) geformt,

Berufe auf dem Niveau von Prod-User:innen neu formuliert,

Demos zu einer Mischung aus *First & Second Life*, Biologie und „artificial life",

Kultur zu einer Kategorie der Miet-Kulturen von Google, Huawei, WhatsApp, Facebook, o.ä.

Wohin das führt, kann niemand sagen.

Da aber jedes soziale Kommunikationsgeschehen von der datenökonomischen und datensozialen Transformation erfasst werden wird, sind Forschungskategorien erforderlich, mit denen die komplexen Dynamiken des Sozialen erfasst werden, – und in ‚nahe Zukunft' verlängert werden können. Wissend, dass mehr als Vorschläge nicht daraus werden können und sollten. Zustände und Zukünfte sind zwar, wie es aus einer Richtung heißt, *user-/consumer-driven*, und aus der anderen Richtung: *technology-driven*.

Aber dieses ‚treiben/steuern/fahren' ist weder in seiner Entstehung und Durchsetzung, noch in seinen möglichen Zielen dargestellt. Gerade die Diversität und Komplexität der Entwicklungen legen keinerlei Ziel fest. Sie ermöglichen keinerlei Eindeutigkeit, weder im hermeneutischen, noch im mathematischen Sinne. Diese menschengemachten Dynamiken sind ko-evolutionär ‚ziellos', trotz ihrer augenblicklichen funktionalen Leistungsspitze. Wer freut sich nicht, wenn die Realität des Computer-Interfaces störungsfrei 24h am Tag in Echtzeit auf- und abgebaut wird?

Bislang liegen allerdings keine normativ orientierten Debatten um Daten- und Digital-Kultur vor, keine Debatten über Daten-Völker, Daten-Migrant:innen, keine über die Machtspannungen zwischen „Gutenberg-Galaxis", magischen Kanälen (McLuhan 1994) und *Turing-Galaxis*. Auch fehlen Entwicklungsmodelle, die auf einen technologischen Humanismus zielen oder auf eine humanisierte/urbanisierte/zivilisierte Datenökonomie.

Wir erleben ein *Ausbleichen moderner Gesellschaftsformen* (Faßler 2009; 2014), da die datenökonomischen Monopole keiner konkreten Gesellschafts- oder Kulturform dauerhaft bedürfen. Zugleich erleben wir eine *Normen-Bleiche*, da die für Normenentscheidung (bislang noch) erforderlichen Öffentlichkeiten kommunikativ und institutionell nicht zusammenkommen, derzeit.

Gerade auch innerhalb der Fächer Soziologie und Kulturanthropologie sind Bestrebungen erst am Anfang, dem Ausbleichen der (datenökonomischen und netztechnischen) Gesellschaftsform und der Normen-Bleiche entgegenzuwirken. Mit dem Ziel, genossenschaftliche Experimente von informations-ökonomischen Gemeinwohlbezügen zu unterstützen. Dies wird erfordern, sich einesteils von den Idealen überzeitlicher Sozialordnungen grundlegend zu trennen. Und es wird erfordern, nicht nur Rechte für Diversität und Differenzen einzufordern, sondern zugleich formulieren, worin das Gemeinwohl, die verbindlichen Zusammenhänge und die sozio-technologischen sowie ökologischen Grundlagen bestehen.

Dabei wird die bisherige Dreistufigkeit der Entwicklung von kybernetischer Informationsökonomie (= Digitalisierung) zu berücksichtigen sein. Die Entwicklungsverläufe von Datentechnologie, die weiter zu berücksichtigen sind, sind:

- additive Verläufe: Zusatz für Verwaltung und Steuerung durch Großrechenanlagen in Versicherungen, Banken, statischen Bereichen der Bauwirtschaft, Militär [Communication-Command-Control-/C3-Programme] (Entwicklungen seit den späten 1930ern, z. B. durch Z1/Z2 von Konrad Zuse, durch Enigma, Colossus seitens der USA und England in den 1940ern, sowie die Etablierung von Großrechenanlagen für die Unterstützung von unternehmerischen und politischen Verwaltungen seit den 1950ern),
- substitutive Verläufe: Seit 1956 forschungsstrategisch und industriell vorangetriebene Entwicklung von Artificial Intelligence (Dartmouth, 1. AI-Konferenz) als für Ersatz für körperlich-schwere Arbeiten (Robotik), sich wiederholende Fließband-Arbeit, komplexe Rechenverfahren in Versicherungen etc., und vor allem für die Konzepte selbstlernender Automatisierung,

    - und als soziale und globale Gesamtordnung, die durch die gegenwärtige Algorithmisierung von Hyperlinks dazu tendiert, ein automatisiertes Meta-Netzwerk des Sozialen zu bilden. Die Verknüpfung von lokalen Maschinenparks, globalen Vernetzungsprogrammen, individualisierenden Welt-Angeboten und kulturellen und sozialen Angeboten, die sich in Echtzeit bilden können und ebenso rasch verworfen werden können, überschreiten die früheren Angebote von additiv und s*ubstitutiv*.
    - Durch die global eingesetzten Algorithmen der Vernetzung und die globalen Märkte relativ einheitlich funktionierender Geräte – trotz der ökonomischen und sicherheitspolitischen Streits um Google, Facebook, Huawei etc.
- konstitutive Verläufe: Auf der Basis von sogenannter *social networks, social technologies, social marketing, design, innovations, analytics, bonds*, vorangetrieben durch Plattform-Kapitale und globale Datenindustrien seit Web 2.0 (also den 2000ern), entstehen Körperschaften und Sozialordnungen neuer Prägung. Sie werden von automatisierenden Programmen, Menschen, Maschinen, Algorithmisierung von Netzwerken getragen, die kein Territorium, keine kulturelle Gemeinschafts- und Konfliktentwicklung mehr teilen. Sie haben asymmetrische, sekündliche, gemietete Vernetzungen als Basis. Die globalen Datenökonomien, die derzeit durch The Big 9 (Webb 2019) vertreten sind, fügen Geschäftsbereiche zu Sozialverfassungen zusammen. Sie greifen nach der Grundlage von Legitimation, Legalisierung, Wissenskulturen (Faßler 2020). Sie eignen sich auch die politischen Bedingungen von Sozialen Verfassungen an, indem sie immer mehr soziale Gruppen integrieren, ihre Heterogenität in den Praxen datenkonformer Kommunikation umgehen.

Alle drei bisherigen Entwicklungsschwerpunkte angewandter Kybernetik (oder Digitalisierung) werden weiterhin gleichzeitig intensiviert werden.

Eine kulturanthropologisch begründete (Entstehungs- und) Veränderungsforschung sollte mit der Erforschung dieser Krisen der Sozial- und Politik-Verfassungen beginnen. Und dies nicht als Technologie-Kritik, sondern als Praxis-Kritik.

Zum Leitspruch dieser Erforschung generativer Realitäten könnte der Satz werden:

Die Praxis ist das Medium!

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